

Ruby M. Ayres

Selected Novels and Stories

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*Where are
You Going ?*

*By
Ruby M. Ayres*

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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary
and have no relation to any living person.*

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CHAPTER I

THERE was nothing at all romantic in his appearance as he walked slowly along the village street, and yet—for some reason she would have been unable to explain—Marlene, sitting at the driving wheel of her car, impatiently waiting for Isabel to finish gossiping in the grocer's shop, found herself watching him with curious intentness.

A tall man, slightly lame, and somewhat shabbily dressed—in the ordinary way she would not have given him a second glance, and yet—on this bright May afternoon, something about him seemed to hold her attention, making her feel that in the almost forgotten days before the war, she must have seen him before.

She hadn't, of course, she was quite sure of that, for Marlene had an excellent memory, especially where men were concerned; nevertheless the conviction persisted, even after the man had disappeared from sight round a bend in the road.

A tall man, probably over six feet—Marlene liked tall men—and she had been quick to notice the flash of interest which suddenly crossed his face as he glanced in her direction.

A tired-looking man, she realised that also. Perhaps a discharged soldier.

Well, he was out of sight now—probably just a chance visitor to the village, although as he was carrying

both a suit-case and an overcoat, it looked as if it was his intention to remain.

A friend of the Trounces' perhaps—a family famous for their hospitality. There was always someone arriving at their large, happy-go-lucky home, either for the night or the week-end, or indefinitely. It had been the same all through the war, in spite of rationing and lack of domestic help. They had plenty of money, of course, which made it easy for them to be generous though not every well-to-do family in the neighbourhood gave so readily and unstintingly to those who were less fortunate.

Marlene liked the Trounces, and at least one of them—Stuart Trounce—adored the ground upon which she walked, though she cared nothing for him except as a friend, for her heart had long ago been given away to another man whom she had not seen for—oh, a lifetime, it seemed!

This hateful war! . . . what endless misery it had brought to everyone in a greater or lesser degree!

And now it was over! But in spite of cheering crowds and flag-wagging, those in authority spoke with a cautious note, warning people that it was only in Europe the so-called peace existed, and that in the East a great deal still remained to be done and much hard fighting must be anticipated. Marlene knew that well enough—for Hugh Clifford was out in the East, and it was some months since she had heard from him. She sighed and glanced impatiently at the closed door of the grocer's shop. Isabel was still there, talking in her usual voluble fashion to the woman behind the counter, all about nothing, of course!

Marlene opened her bag and looked at her reflection

in the small hand-mirror before, more from force of habit than real necessity, she mechanically began to powder her nose.

A very charming nose, and a lovely face! . . . A little petulant in expression just now because she hated to be kept waiting, especially by Isabel, to whom time was of no account whatever.

Isabel was, as she gaily informed everyone, a sort of cousin of Marlene's "many times removed." She was also an elderly spinster with a heart of gold, and a most irritating personality.

She loved talking, though she seldom had anything of real interest or importance to say, and she prided herself upon having been, and still being, the greatest optimist in the country. All through the war, and in almost every room of her cottage home which was known as Green Elms, she had kept a framed copy of Queen Victoria's famous edict, hung in a prominent spot, informing all and sundry that "there is no depression in this house," and ever since the first shot had been fired she had made a weekly practice of taking the six Union Jacks (which she had saved from the 1918 armistice) from the special drawer where they were kept with a liberal supply of moth balls, and shaking them out to make sure they were in first-rate condition.

"Peace may come at *any* moment," she would say gaily, "and it is as well to be prepared."

They were all in triumphant use now—stretching from the front door to the gate, together with an enormous V sign outside Isabel's own bedroom window which Mr. Chippendale had carved for her at least two years ago, and had painted in red, white, and blue.

"V for Victory," Isabel had informed everyone happily at least a hundred times—as if they didn't know what it stood for!

Marlene always knew in advance exactly what Isabel was about to say, and sometimes Isabel irritated her almost beyond endurance, in spite of the fact that she had a real affection for her, and a most profound gratitude.

They had lived together for thirteen years—"Lucky thirteen" Isabel had remarked only that morning—ever since a tragic accident had robbed Marlene of both parents.

She was only a child of six then, shockingly spoilt and extremely wilful, but although, when she adopted her, Isabel had announced with her usual breezy optimism, "I shall soon change all that and bring her up to be a good, docile little girl," she had promptly proceeded to spoil and adore her even more strenuously than her parents had done.

And now Marlene was nineteen, a very beautiful and sophisticated nineteen, and although since leaving school, she had made several ineffectual attempts to join one of the Women's Forces, on each occasion the attempt had been firmly frustrated (though not intentionally) by Isabel.

First she had been laid up with a bad attack of pneumonia, which had necessitated her removal to hospital where she had remained for many weeks, and because it had been impossible to leave Green Elms and Mr. Chippendale to the tender mercies of the woman-help who after great persuasion and solemn consideration had agreed to "Live in!"—Marlene had been forced to remain. On her second attempt to don a becoming

uniform, Isabel had managed to break her hip by falling off a ladder in the garden while gathering plums, an accident which had left her painfully lame, though she refused to recognise her infirmity, and waved all sympathy aside by protesting gaily that it might have been so much *worse* ! . . . and that at any rate, the plums had made the most heavenly preserve !

Marlene was, however, obliged to admit that there had certainly been one bright spot attached to this second failure to help her country, for as Green Elms was some two miles from the village and the station, the Powers-that-Be had graciously allowed Isabel a small ration of petrol for the little two-seater car which, in a moment of rash extravagance, she had bought at the outbreak of war, and which had remained jacked up in its garage ever since.

Stuart Trounce had taught Marlene to drive, and so twice a week, and sometimes more often, she drove Isabel down to the village to buy their weekly rations. Needless to say Isabel made the most of the little outings, for she was unable to walk more than a very short distance at a time and so, while Marlene waited impatiently for her, she would talk volubly and at great length to Mrs. Parsons or to anyone else who appeared willing to listen.

" I like to be friends with *everyone*, and I think I am ! " was one of Isabel's favourite remarks.

Marlene had finished powdering her nose and had started up the car—just as a reminder—when Isabel appeared at the shop door.

She was a grey-haired, smiling woman with a slim, youthful figure, and a slightly high-pitched, insistent voice.

"You run back with the rations, Marlene," she ordered now. "Jane will be waiting for them, and you know how she dislikes being kept waiting——" (So do I, Marlene thought ruefully.) But she made no remark, and Isabel continued, "Mrs. Parsons hasn't unpacked Chippendale's tobacco yet, so I shall stay till she does. Call back for me in twenty minutes, and I'll be ready." And with a cheery wave of her hand she re-entered the shop.

Marlene shrugged her shoulders philosophically and drove slowly away. Isabel *wouldn't* be ready in twenty minutes she knew, probably not for an hour or more, but, of course, it wouldn't do to keep the great Jane waiting indefinitely. Jane always threatened to "walk out" if things did not go exactly to her liking. All the same, Marlene wasn't sure that she altogether believed the story about Chippendale's tobacco—it was much more likely that Isabel just wanted an excuse to prolong her conversation with the kindly Mrs. Parsons who was always a sympathetic listener, even to Isabel's platitudinous accounts of how many eggs the hens had laid during the past two days, what books she had read, how many scarves she had knitted for men of the Merchant Service, and so on, and so on!

However, Mr. Chippendale would probably believe the excuse, he was goodness itself to Isabel (and to everyone else if it came to that) and never showed the least sign of impatience or boredom with her volubility.

His name wasn't really Chippendale, it was Wood—John Wood—and it was Marlene who had christened him Chippendale because his one hobby in life was

carving fantastic animals and figures from anything and everything. He was Isabel's brother, an elderly widower of some sixty odd years to whom she had offered a home following the death of his wife. "So sad, such a tragedy!" Isabel always called it, refusing to recognise that since his bereavement Mr. Chippendale had been happier than ever in his life before. He was a quiet, unobtrusive man, who gave no trouble whatever. He had a little shed at the bottom of the garden where he carved his fantastic figures—he was always punctual for meals, and he never complained on days when the great Jane wilfully absented herself and they were often shockingly late in being served. Marlene loved Mr. Chippendale more than anyone in the world (except Hugh Clifford), but then everyone loved him, though it was difficult to explain exactly why. A lumbering sort of man with a large forehead and the kindest eyes in the world, there was nothing he would not do to help his fellow creatures, or any animal in distress. Any lost dog, stray cat, injured bird, could always find a friend in Mr. Chippendale, and a home at Green Elms for as long as it suited them to stay.

"I believe they tell one another," Marlene teased him affectionately, though, of course, Isabel at once remarked that animals and birds could not speak—"Fortunately for us, perhaps," she added vaguely.

Even the great Jane called Mr. Chippendale a real gentleman and wished there were more like him in the world.

It was a queer household—the sort of household one sometimes saw on the stage, or read about in books, but although there were moments when she longed to get away from it, and to see something of the world,

and to have what people called a good time, Marlene was never really unhappy—at least, only when she thought about Hugh.

She was free to do as she liked—Isabel gave her a generous allowance which was often quietly added to by Mr. Chippendale, and she was really fond of Green Elms with its quaint, old-fashioned furniture and little walled-in garden.

And of course, some day, when the other, hideous war in the East was over, things would be different, she often reminded herself. If—*when* Hugh came safely home—(Isabel would never for a moment admit the possibility that he might not) they would marry and live happily ever after. It was two years now since he went away, and two years is a long time when one is young—a lifetime it seemed to Marlene, though Hugh wrote as often as it was possible, adoring letters which were her most cherished possessions.

Theirs had been a case of love at first sight, though she had been only just seventeen when he came into her life.

“It’s very young to become engaged,” Isabel had said dubiously, though she had appeared a trifle shocked when Marlene told her, “But we’re not engaged—not definitely—Hugh thinks we ought to wait till the war is over. But it’s the same as if we were,” she added confidently. “I shall never care for anyone else.”

Hugh was handsome, such a darling! She loved him more every day, even though it was two years since they parted!

If only she could see him again . . . if only the flags and festoons flying from nearly every house and shop

in the village meant that *all* wars were over, instead of just the one in Europe!

"They soon will be," Isabel insisted gaily, but Mr. Chippendale shook his head, and protested that it did not do to be unduly optimistic.

Oh well, there was nothing to be done about it, Marlene told herself philosophically, as she turned the bend in the road and again saw the tall figure of the man in the shabby suit.

He was standing still this time, with the suit-case at his feet as if he was tired of carrying it, tired of walking, tired of everything perhaps, as *she* sometimes felt!

Marlene unconsciously slowed down a little, steering the car nearer to the path where he was standing. He had taken off his hat now, and was mopping his forehead with a handkerchief, and once more Marlene realised the weariness of his face—a sort of *last* look, she thought!

Not a handsome man—not like Hugh—but there was something about him, something she could not explain, but which again gave her that curious feeling of kinship, as if they were not strangers, so that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to speak to him and to ask,

"Where are you going? Can I give you a lift?"

"Where am I going?" he smiled ruefully as he repeated her question. "I wish I knew, but I haven't the slightest idea. I'm looking for rooms, but it seems pretty hopeless, every place is full up. I suppose you can't suggest anywhere?"

"Have you tried the Bear Inn?"

He nodded. "Yes, but they haven't a room."

Marlene almost said, "I believe the Trounces would

put you up, even if it's only for a few days——" but, for some absurd reason, she did not want this man to go to the Trounces, kind and hospitable as they were.

"Will it be—for long?" she asked instead.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no definite plans—but I like this place. I came here once, several years ago. It's quiet and—I like quiet, and the country." He looked away from her down the curving road as he continued, "There was a cottage I saw when I was last here—Green Elms it was called. I don't know why I've remembered it, except that I like old houses. It's somewhere in this direction—perhaps you know it. I asked a porter at the station if he knew it, and if the owner would be likely to let me a room, but——" He again shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"And what did he say?" Marlene asked. She knew who the porter must have been, old Phipps, who was never tired of talking about the last war, and saying how much worse it had been than this one, but that was the way middle-aged people always talked! Though how anything could possibly have been worse than this inhuman slaughtering of civilians Marlene failed to understand.

She had been in London when the Flying Bombs started, and she had not forgotten her terror and the uncanny feeling it gave her to know that this new weapon was unpiloted and like some vile monster from an unknown world.

"He didn't know," the man answered, "but he told me the name of its owner, a Miss Wood—a nice woman he said she was, but talked too much——" He laughed. "I don't know whether it's worth while making

enquiries ! . . . probably not." He stooped to pick up his suit-case and Marlene said quickly.

"I know Miss Wood, I'll drive you to Green Elms—" and she opened the door of the car.

"You're very kind," the man said. "But I don't like to trouble you."

"It's no trouble." She took his overcoat from him and laid it across the back of the seat. "You're a soldier, aren't you?" she asked a little shyly.

"I was—but I was invalided out—some months ago."

She looked at him with sympathetic eyes.

"Were you—in Europe?" she asked.

"I was at Dunkirk—and afterwards out East."

"Oh!" She caught her breath. "And—that was even worse?"

"Pretty bad."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask impulsively, "I suppose you never met Hugh Clifford—Captain Clifford?" but, of course, it would be such a foolish question, when "Out East" extended for so many hundreds of miles.

She drove slowly on, until Green Elms with its fluttering flags came into sight amongst the trees, and then suddenly the man beside her leaned forward, looking towards it intently.

"That's the place," he said. "I've always remembered it—it looks so—friendly—the sort of home I've always wanted."

"Haven't you—a home?"

"No," he laughed. "And not a relative in the world—as far as I know. I'm what might be called a lonely soldier."

Marlene turned to look at him, and again she was aware of that curious feeling of—kinship, was it?—strange sympathy?—mutual understanding?

“Tell me your name,” she said.

“Strasmore—Michael Strasmore.”

A name she had never heard before.

The man was still looking towards the cottage, and suddenly he asked surprisingly,

“Do you like poetry?—but perhaps not.”

“I—yes—I do—some poetry. Why?”

“Because there is a verse—you may know it—which seems as if it might have been written about this place—it so exactly describes it—at least, I think so.” He laughed a little self-consciously.

“Tell it to me,” Marlene invited.

There was the slightest hesitation before he obeyed, with almost boyish shyness—

“I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled
Above the green elms, that a cottage was near:
And I said ‘If there’s peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble might hope for it here.’”

He stopped, and it seemed a long time to Marlene before she could steady her voice sufficiently to speak.

“Listen,” she said quietly, because somehow she felt that his thoughts were far away from her, “I am related to Miss Wood. I live at Green Elms with her and her brother, Mr. Chippendale, and I think—I am almost sure, if you care to stay with us, until you can find somewhere else to go, she will be willing and—glad to take you. We’re—quite ordinary people—but the

house is quiet—and comfortable—and—— My name is Marlene—Marlene Beech—Miss Wood and I are cousins—many times removed, as she always tells everyone,” she added, with a smile.

The man repeated her name slowly, and without much interest.

“Marlene—Marlene Beech—it’s a very uncommon name,” but he might have said with truth :

“I know who you are ; I know all about you. I have your photograph in my pocket at this very moment.”

CHAPTER II

MR. CHIPPENDALE was in the porch when Marlene drove Michael Strasmore up to the door of Green Elms. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his rather large feet were thrust into a very worn down-at-heel pair of shoes. His gardening shoes, he called them, though as a matter of fact Mr. Chippendale never did any gardening, being much too occupied with his own hobby. At the moment he was not a very attractive-looking figure, Marlene thought ruefully, and she glanced at the man beside her with a faintly apologetic smile, but Michael Strasmore was apparently quite unconscious of Mr. Chippendale—he was looking up at the house with a sort of warm welcome in his eyes, almost as if it was his home to which he had returned after a long absence.

Marlene stopped the car and got out, as Mr. Chippendale shifted his spectacles to the end of his nose and looked over the top of them at Strasmore with mild curiosity.

Marlene introduced the two men—

“Mr. Strasmore—Mr. Chippendale . . . Come in, won’t you, Mr. Strasmore? I’ll just take these parcels to the kitchen and then I’ll come and explain—I won’t be a moment.”

“Come in, won’t you?” Mr. Chippendale echoed with vague hospitality, and he led the way into the little front sitting-room. “I suppose you are a friend of Marlene’s?” he submitted.

Strasmore laughed. “Well, not exactly—we have never met until this morning, but she very kindly offered me a lift, and when I mentioned that I am looking for rooms somewhere in the village, she—well, she volunteered to help me.”

Mr. Chippendale shifted his spectacles back to their proper position on the bridge of his nose.

“Rooms!” he said dubiously. “Rooms, eh? Well now, it won’t be too easy to find them, I’m afraid, though Isabel may know of some—Isabel knows most things. Where *is* Isabel, by the way?”

“Where do you *think* she is?” Marlene asked gaily as she entered the room. “Gossiping with Mrs. Parsons, of course.” She eyed Mr. Chippendale a little dubiously before continuing: “Mr. Strasmore is looking for rooms and can’t find them, so I thought—I wondered—if perhaps we could put him up—for the present, anyway. Isabel won’t mind I am sure—will she?”

“Isabel never minds anything,” Mr. Chippendale

agreed. "My sister," he informed Michael, "is a very wonderful woman. . . ."

He didn't really think so. As a matter of fact Isabel frequently bored him and got on his nerves, just as she did on Marlene's, though he would have bitten his tongue through rather than admit it.

"Do you know our village, Mr. Strasmore?"

"I was here once—only for a day or two—before the war."

"And he liked it," Marlene supplemented. "He saw this house and remembered it, too."

Mr. Chippendale removed his spectacles and stowed them away in his waistcoat pocket.

"Are you interested in wood carving?" he inquired with a sudden show of enthusiasm. "Because if you are——"

Marlene again interrupted. "Yes, show him your workshop while I go and collect Isabel—I shan't be more than ten minutes—unless—unless you would rather come with me? Just as you like," she added carelessly, but she was conscious of a faint annoyance when Strasmore replied that he would be interested to see the workshop. As if it mattered twopenny one way or the other, she told herself scornfully as she drove back to the village—the man was a complete stranger, anyway!

Isabel was still sitting by the counter, talking nineteen to the dozen, as Marlene entered the shop and determinedly interrupted the one-sided conversation:

"Are you ready? We've got a visitor—someone who is anxious to see you——" and taking her firmly by the arm, she led her out to the car.

"*Really*, Marlene!" Isabel reproached her. "I was just explaining to Mrs. Parsons how many coupons one must give up for enough wool to make a pull-over—she *never* seems to remember!" And then, her curiosity getting the better of her, "And who is the visitor who is so anxious to see me?" She held up a silencing hand when Marlene would have spoken. "—No, let me guess! Now—who can it possibly *be*, I wonder?"

"You'll never guess," Marlene told her in a long-suffering voice, "because it's someone you've never seen—it's a soldier—his name is Michael Strasmore and he's looking for rooms in the village. I offered him a lift and——"

Isabel again interrupted—"There isn't a vacant room for miles around. The Bear Inn is full up and—*ah!* I have an idea——" She stood still, with one foot on the running board of the car, and the other in the gutter. "Why can't we offer the poor man a room, at any rate for the present? He has fought for us, and so——" but her voice was drowned as Marlene rather violently started the engine running.

"You may as well get in," she said presently, "because the same idea has already occurred to me, and if you approve, I think Mr. Strasmore will be glad to accept the offer. He looks very tired——" She stopped, remembering Strasmore's reply to her question "Where are you going?"

"Where am I going? I wish I knew, but I haven't the slightest idea."

So many people were in that same, over-crowded boat on an unknown sea, drifting along with the tide not knowing where it would take them, or upon what

shore they might eventually find peace and security. "I'm a passenger myself," Marlene thought ruefully—mentally, at least, until she and Hugh Clifford were together again.

"Well now, I call that a most strange coincidence," Isabel was saying brightly. "Evidently a case of two great minds thinking as one! Is this poor fellow an officer, or just a soldier? Not that it makes any difference; they have all fought for us!"

"I don't know—he's in mufti——" But Isabel's thoughts had already run on ahead:

"He can have the room next to Chippendale's—it's quiet, and it gets the morning sun. I always think *sunrise* is so much more cheering than *sunset*, don't you? Especially for someone who has suffered as no doubt this poor fellow has suffered!" She sighed—"This terrible war—still terrible, even though it is supposed to be finished! I feel we shall never be able to do enough for those who have brought us safely through it!" And then, in direct contradiction, "Should one ask for a reference, do you think, Marlene? It's always as well to be on the safe side, isn't it? One reads such strange stories in the newspapers—not that I have a word to say against *any* man who has fought for his country, but——"

"Wait till you see him——" Marlene interrupted.

Isabel nodded. "Yes, you're right. I must wait till I see him! I am a strong believer in first impressions, as you know. I have only to look at people once, to know whether they are to be liked and trusted, and I am *never* wrong! Don't you remember that housekeeper woman we had? Clara, her name was! I *never* felt happy about her, if you remember, and when she left,

look at the things we missed! . . . My needlecase . . . Chippendale's best tie. . . ." She would have gone on endlessly had not Marlene somewhat impatiently cut her short. "Well, get in, there's a dear—— The sooner you meet Mr. Strasmore the better—I am sure you will like him——" and she remembered the queer feeling, almost of kinship, of which she had been conscious when she first saw him. Yes, she was sure Isabel would like him! Not that Isabel was really such a good judge of characters as she had just declared, for she had insisted upon engaging Clara, the housekeeper woman, in spite of Chippendale's mild warning that there was something about her he did not like.

"She doesn't look you straight in the eyes," he had said, and Chippendale was always right; so right that had he asserted black was white, Marlene felt she would have believed him.

Isabel had at last seated herself and Marlene was just about to drive away when a girl jumped off a bicycle beside the car, and came to the window——

"Hullo! . . ." she said cheerfully. "Any luck this morning? Someone told me there were cherries in the village, but so far I can't find *one*! . . . Good morning, Miss Wood——"

Isabel smiled graciously, glad of a fresh audience.

"We're in a tremendous hurry," she declared. "But it's always nice to see you, Gladdie—— And how attractive you are looking this morning!"

Gladys Trounce glanced down at her trousered legs and laughed.

"I always wear them when I'm cycling—they're so much more comfortable, though Mrs. Hale thinks

they're shocking! Only the other day, she asked what I should think if the boys suddenly took it into their heads to wear skirts."

Mrs. Hale was the vicar's wife, and it was a well known fact that she disapproved of the entire Trounce family, and—in spite of their great generosity to all and sundry—of everything they did.

Gladys Trounce was a very chic, smart looking girl in an ultra-modern way, and although, outwardly, she and Marlene were the best of friends, and occasionally addressed one another as "darling" each was slightly jealous of the other.

Marlene was the more beautiful—but because the Trounce family were wealthy, Gladys led a far more interesting life, and made the most of her many opportunities.

"Well, if you're in a hurry——" she said now, which was a sign for a fresh burst of volubility from Isabel.

"Such excitement! . . . I *must* tell you about it!" she laughed. "We're going to take a paying guest! . . . at least, I'm not sure about the paying part, are we, Marlene? But he's a soldier—I'm not sure whether he's an officer or not, because he's in mufti—but Marlene says he's *most* attractive——"

"I never said so," Marlene interposed, but Isabel was not to be discouraged. "Well anyway, he has a most attractive name——" she insisted—"What is it, Marlene? Maurice—no, Michael—Michael Sutherland——"

"Michael Strasmore," Marlene corrected. She looked at Gladys with a tolerant smile—a smile which faded as she saw the strained amazement and intensity of the elder girl's face——

"Strasmore—Michael Strasmore!" she said with sharp intensity. "Why—then—I know him——"

Isabel gave a little squeal of delight.

"You know him! . . . Now, isn't that amazing! Really, this is a morning of coincidences. First, both Marlene and I have the same idea of offering him a room at Green Elms—the poor man has been hunting for rooms, and, of course, couldn't find any—and now you say you know him! . . . How do you know him, Gladdie? *Do* tell us something about him——"

But Gladys had already recovered her self control.

"It may not be the same man——" she answered carelessly. "Though it's rather an uncommon name! . . . Anyway, if after all, he doesn't stay with you, tell him to come along to our place—we've heaps of room—Tell him you met me—I don't think he knows we live here. You see it's—some time since we met——"

She looked away, down the street, and there was a moment of eloquent silence before she spoke again—"Well, I must be off! . . . see you soon——" and mounting her machine she rode away.

"Well, of all the strange coincidences," Isabel said again. "How true it is that every day the world grows smaller and smaller! . . . and how amazed Mr. Sutherland, or whatever his name is, will be when we tell him that Gladdie lives here—— Of course, he may prefer to go to the 'Trounces', still, we shall see——" She leaned forward to pick up her handbag which, as usual, she had dropped.

"Well, here we are! home again," she said brightly. She always made the same remark, even if she had only been as far as the letter-box at the corner, not more than twenty yards from the house. "And

now for our soldier-man! Where is he to be found, Marlene?"

"With Chippendale—in the workshop."

Isabel hurried off to the little shed at the bottom of the garden, and Marlene left the car standing in the drive and entered the house, glancing—from force of habit—towards a silver tray on the hall table where Jane—the general factotum—invariably put any letters.

None now, of course—how could there be? For the morning post had been delivered before breakfast, and there was no other until late afternoon. But Marlene always looked towards that silver tray, hoping to see an envelope addressed in a well-loved writing. Months now, since Hugh had written to her.

"No news is good news," Isabel always declared with irritating optimism, and she would go on to relate some entirely imaginary story which she firmly believed to be true, of a woman who had not heard anything of her husband for at least three years, and had given him up for lost, when one day four letters arrived from him by the same post!—"Which only shows how wrong it is to give up hope," she would conclude dramatically.

Nice to be such a profound optimist, Marlene sometimes thought, though, of course, by her own admission, Isabel had never been in love, and so could not understand the incessant fear and torment of those who were!

And then suddenly her thoughts turned to Michael Strasmore.

Was he a married man? Surely not, for he had told her that as far as he knew, he hadn't a relative in the world, though of course at one time or another, he

must have cared for some girl—perhaps for Gladys Trounce! though she didn't seem exactly the type to attract him, but one could never tell.

Strasmore was quite attractive himself, in a big, manly way. He had a touch of the romantic also, which Marlene had instantly realised when he quoted that verse to her—

“I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled
About the green elms, that a cottage was near;
And I said ‘If there’s peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble might hope for it here.’”

Funny that Isabel's little house should be called Green Elms— “Yet another coincidence,” Isabel, of course, would say brightly. “Life is so full of them! And how true it is that truth is stranger than fiction! . . . Not that I ever read fiction——” she would be sure to add with her usual contradiction.

What would she think of Michael Strasmore, Marlene wondered; he wasn't the type of man she usually admired. Isabel liked quiet, shy men, men without much personality—men who would listen with silent courtesy while she chattered to them, just throwing in a polite “yes” or “no” as the occasion seemed to demand.

And would Strasmore—when he heard that the Trounces lived in the village—take advantage of Gladys' suggestion and perhaps stay with them?

Their house was the last word in luxury—very different to Green Elms, and yet Marlene could not forget the way Strasmore had looked up at it when they

arrived—with a sort of warm welcome in his eyes, as if it was his own home to which he had returned after a long absence.

Across the garden she could hear Isabel's high-pitched voice talking volubly and excitedly from the little shed where Mr. Chippendale spent most of his life. He and Isabel were so utterly different, even though they were brother and sister; Chippendale quiet and entirely content with his own company, and Isabel always on the *qui vive*, and eagerly searching for companionship, no matter of what kind. "I simply cannot *bear* to be alone," she would often say with a shiver. "I love the company of my fellow-creatures more than anything else in the world!"

It was not so certain that her fellow-creatures returned the compliment, kind and generous as she was! Still, it was impossible to criticise her, or to blame her for anything. As Mr. Chippendale had remarked to Strasmore—"My sister is a very wonderful woman"—as she was, in many ways!

"*Mar-lene!* . . . *Mar-lene!*" Isabel's shrill voice called imperatively to her, and with a half sigh, Marlene turned back and walked across the garden to Chippen-
dale's little workshop.

Isabel met her in the doorway——

"It's all fixed up," she announced happily. "Mr. Sutherland—Strasmore, I mean—will be delighted to stay with us. I told him about Gladdie Trounce, and her very kind offer for him to go there if he cared to, but——" she laughed—"Mr. Strasmore thinks our unpretentious little house will suit him far better than their great mansion—don't you, Mr. Suther—Stras—more?" she appealed, turning to look at him.

Above her head, Strasmore's steady eyes met Marlene's—

"Yes—I would rather stay here—if I may——" he said quietly, and again she was conscious of that strange feeling of kinship—as if they had known one another for many years—as she answered with a faint smile——

"Yes—please stay."

"And now," Isabel said brightly, as she and Marlene returned to the house, leaving the two men alone, "we can truthfully say that we have a full house! I have often felt a little guilty about that one empty bedroom, knowing how many unfortunate people there are who have nowhere to go!" She stopped in the hall to look at Michael Strasmore's somewhat shabby, tightly packed knapsack which was lying in a corner. "Is that *all* the luggage he has brought?" she submitted dubiously.

"He could hardly carry any more, could he?" Marlene replied. "And anyway, he may not stay very long—— What was your wonderful first impression of him?" she asked mischievously.

"*Excellent*," Isabel retorted firmly. "The moment I saw him I felt almost as if he was an old friend—and he has such a delightful hand-shake—so *firm*! . . . a firm hand-shake means so much!"

"Did he admit that he knew Gladys Trounce?"

Isabel nodded. "Oh, yes! . . . but he has never met her people—though, of course, he *will* do so! though he didn't appear particularly interested to hear that they lived in the village!" She raised her voice and called, "Jane! . . ." and then as the general factotum appeared in the kitchen doorway—"We have a visitor," she informed her a little apologetically, "and

we must get the bedroom next to Mr. Chippendale's ready at once——"

"A gentleman?" Jane enquired suspiciously, and when Isabel nodded, she gave a sigh of relief. "Then that's all right," she declared. "Gentlemen is much less trouble than ladies. As my mother used to say, she never minded how many men there were in the house, but when it came to wimmen—*well!* Too interfering, most of them, or else not interfering enough, and won't lend a hand at anything." She turned at the foot of the staircase for a final question. "Will he be an elderly gentleman, Miss Wood?"

"Oh dear me, no!" Isabel retorted cheerfully. "I should say about—how old would you think, Marlene?"

"I've no idea—about thirty, probably—he's been a soldier, Jane——" Marlene gave the information deliberately, knowing that if Jane had any particular weakness, it was for a man who had worn uniform! *any* uniform—police, Home Guard—she looked upon them all as valiant heroes, even if they had done no greater service to the country than direct the traffic, or report faults in the black-out!

Isabel followed Jane upstairs, chattering all the time, and Marlene turned into the sitting-room, and looked out of the window with wistful eyes. Why couldn't it have been Hugh, who had so suddenly appeared on the scene, instead of this stranger-man she asked herself unhappily? Things for which one longed never seemed to happen.

It was in this very room that she and Hugh had said their last good-bye. An October evening it had been—grey and chilly.

Overnight there had been a sharp frost, and the leaves were tumbling slowly from the trees, and the dahlias drooping forlornly from their stems.

Marlene remembered how she had said in a despairing outburst, "If only it had been spring, instead of autumn, nothing would have seemed so dreadful and—hopeless!"

She had always disliked the autumn—hating to see everything in the garden fading and dying—and the knowledge that with every day, the hours of sunlight must grow shorter.

Hugh had laughed and had done his best to cheer her—declaring that he was like the bad penny which always turned up again, no matter how determinedly one tried to get rid of it.

So like Hugh, that was, always joking at moments which to her were a tragedy—and refusing to look on the dark side of anything. Sometimes she had wished he would be a little more serious and—yes, romantic!

But he wasn't made that way—and once, when—with a sudden longing to hear him admit how much she meant to him, she had asked what he would do if she suddenly grew tired of him, he had answered unhesitatingly—"I should have to find another girl, I suppose——" Not that his heart would be broken, or that life would never be the same again, as Stuart Trounce would unhesitatingly have declared! Men were so different, and she knew a good many! which made it the more strange that she should care so much for Hugh, who was actually quite unlike her conception of what a lover should be. Marlene had never told anyone that it was entirely by Hugh's wish, and not her own, that they had not been formally engaged before

he went away; she had allowed both Isabel and Mr. Chippendale to believe that she had gently insisted that they should wait! How many times since had she regretted that she was not definitely bound to him! Not that it made any actual difference, except—she sighed as she glanced down at her left hand, realising that had she worn his ring things would have seemed happier—more secure. Still, the few letters she had received from him since they parted had been sweet and almost entirely satisfactory though not quite long enough! Hugh had never liked writing letters—he always said it was so much easier and quicker to either ring up or send a wire, and so get an answer straight away, without waiting for the post. He had once also said—just jokingly, of course—that letters were so incriminating, and without them there could never have been such a thing as a breach of promise case! and he had audaciously quoted a skit on a well-known verse, just to tease her, naturally—

“Lives of great men all remind us,
As we o’er their pages turn,
Ne’er to die and leave behind us
Letters which we ought to burn!”

The shadow of a smile crossed Marlene’s face at the memory; it was so typical of Hugh, always making fun of the things which were nearest and dearest to his heart—at least, she supposed they must be—if he really loved her!

What was wrong with her to-day, that she should feel so depressed?

The sun was shining, and—her thoughts broke from

their sad retrospection as there was a step on the garden path and Michael Strasmore came into view.

Glad of the interruption, Marlene pushed the window wide and leaned out to speak to him.

"Well, and what do you think of the great workshop?" she asked gaily. Strasmore stopped, and looked at her with a faint smile.

"I think Mr. Chippendale is quite an artist——" he replied. "By the way, Chippendale is not really his name, is it?"

Marlene laughed. "No—it's Wood—the next best thing! I christened him Chippendale—rather clever of me, don't you think?"

"Do you find a nickname for everyone?"

She shook her head. "No, only for people I like best—and their name is not Legion, I assure you," she added with a comical little grimace.

"You must have many friends," Strasmore said. "At least, if you are as kind to everyone as you have been to me. After all, I am a complete stranger! I only hope that some day I may be able to prove my deep gratitude and appreciation."

Marlene laughed. "Quite an after-dinner speech!" she chaffed him, and then, "How funny that you should know Gladys Trounce!"

"She is a friend of yours?"

Marlene nodded.

"Yes—they're a very nice family. All through the war they have kept open house for the troops—— Didn't you know they lived here?"

"No." He spoke rather abruptly and there was a slight frown between his eyes.

A short silence followed before Marlene said—

"Are you coming in, or shall I come out? I don't think your room is quite ready yet, but it won't be long. By the way, Isabel wants to know if there is any more luggage—besides your knapsack?"

"I left one suit-case at the station—it was too heavy to carry about on the chance of finding what I wanted, but now I've been so fortunate——" He stopped, and Marlene said lightly—

"Don't be too sure yet! . . . you may not like us a bit when you know us better."

"I believe in first impressions."

"Do you?" she laughed. "So does Isabel—but she's often quite wrong! . . . I'll drive you down to the station after dinner and fetch the suit-case——"

"You're very kind——" he looked at her hesitatingly. "I've one other admission to make—which I should have mentioned before—I've got a dog."

Marlene opened her lovely eyes wide. "A dog! . . . where is he? You haven't left *him* at the station, too?"

"Yes, I have—but he'll be quite happy—I told him I shouldn't be long, and he understands. The trouble is—will he be welcome here? I know I should have mentioned him before, but——"

"Ask Mr. Chippendale," Marlene interrupted. "He loves all animals, and they all love him——"

"And—Miss Wood?" Strasmore asked diffidently. "Will she mind, do you think?"

Marlene shook her head. "Haven't you already been told that she is a wonderful woman who never minds anything?" she submitted with a rueful smile. "What sort of dog is it?"

Strasmore laughed.

"Don't ask me! . . . he's the world's finest mongrel—he was only a pup when I found him, wandering round the camp down at Salisbury, and Biggens, my batman, said directly he saw him, 'Well, he's a bit of *all*-sorts, if you ask me'—and the name stuck—'Allsorts'—"

"What a lovely name!" said Marlene delightedly; she glanced back at the clock on the mantelshelf. "Only half past twelve, and we don't feed till one, so let's go and fetch him now, shall we? I'm longing to see him—"

And as they were driving away she said, with a little side glance at Strasmore, "I suppose Allsorts adores you, doesn't he?"

"We're the best of friends."

"Chippendale says dogs make better friends than human beings."

"I think Chippendale is right," Strasmore agreed.

She glanced at him again, more interestedly, before she asked impulsively, "And is it really true, as you told me, that you haven't a relative in the world?"

"To the best of my knowledge—perfectly true. My mother died when I was born, and my father was killed in the last war, and since then—"

"Since then?" Marlene encouraged, as he hesitated.

"Since then"—he half shrugged his shoulders—"I was left in the care of a friend of my father's—a decent old boy—who departed this life shortly after I came of age. Then I went abroad—I've travelled a good deal, but only as a rolling stone. I was in Africa when the war broke out, and I came home to join up—"

"And now?" Marlene asked interestedly.

It was a moment before he replied;

"You gave the answer to that question yourself when you first spoke to me and asked, 'Where are you going?'"

"It's what many of us are wondering, isn't it?" Marlene said with unconscious sadness. "Not that I'm lonely, exactly—not as you are; my people are very good to me." She hesitated before continuing on a note of defiance: "My fiancé is out East, but when he comes home——"

She stopped with a queer feeling of uncertainty, and Strasmore said, "Then you will both be rewarded for your faithfulness, and marry and live happily ever after."

He spoke quite impartially, and yet for some reason she felt resentful.

"You don't believe in faithfulness, perhaps," she said coldly.

"I know very little about such things," Strasmore admitted. He laughed. "But I once 'fell in love' I suppose you would call it, with a photograph."

Marlene's lip curled unkindly.

"Some Pin-up Girl?" she asked scornfully.

"No—at least I hardly think she would feel flattered by such a description."

"Oh! . . . then you have met her?"

But they were at the station, and as Marlene stopped the car Strasmore opened the door and got out without answering her question.

"I won't keep you a moment," he said as he strode away.

She looked after him with baffled eyes. Nice? Yes, in some ways, but irritating, too! Irritating because, in spite of her friendly feeling towards him, whenever she felt that friendship was ripening he baffled her and

suddenly became unapproachable. A difficult man to understand. No wonder he was so friendless. She must ask Gladys Trounce about him and see what she had to say. Gladys, who prided herself that she understood all men and found them easy prey!

A terrific joyous barking suddenly broke the silence of the deserted little country station, and the next moment an enormous dog came bounding from the luggage office, circling round in pursuit of its own bushy tail more after the manner of a frisky kitten than a dignified canine.

Allsorts! It had been rightly named, Marlene thought in intense amusement as, followed by its master, the animal approached the car.

Half mastiff, half collie—half all sorts in very truth, as Biggens the batman had said—there was yet something really handsome about the dog as, at his master's word of command, he suddenly sobered down, and putting both front paws on the running board he stood looking up at Marlene, still wagging his tail furiously and slobbering a welcome.

"Well, what do you think of him?" Strasmore asked a little doubtfully.

Marlene touched Allsorts' long ears caressingly as she answered sincerely, "I think he's a perfect darling and I love him already." A sentiment which the dog seemed to understand perfectly, for he at once leapt into the seat beside her and placed a friendly confident paw in her lap.

Marlene looked at Strasmore with laughing eyes.

"I don't know where on earth *you're* going to sit!" she told him. She frowned disapprovingly when he answered carelessly, "Oh, me! I can always take a

back seat." But he pushed the dog nearer to her, squeezing his big body into the small space beside it.

"Allsorts will make a wonderful model for Chippendale," Marlene said. "Where does he sleep? In your room?"

"He sleeps wherever I tell him he is to sleep."

"That sounds very masterful and determined."

"I can be both—when it suits me."

Marlene did not reply, but glancing at him she thought ruefully, "Yes, I'll bet you can—when it suits you."

The drive home was almost silent, but as soon as the car stopped Allsorts was first out and across the threshold, peering inquisitively into the open door of his new home.

Jane, coming from the kitchen with a tray of things for the lunch table, stood still when she saw the new arrival and uttered a stifled scream.

"He won't hurt you, there's no need to be frightened, he's quite gentle," Strasmore hastily assured her.

Jane looked at him with scorn. "It takes more than a dog to frighten *me*," she retorted, and to prove her words she set the tray aside and, kneeling down, put both sinewy arms round Allsorts' neck.

"What about a nice boney-woney?" she invited, coaxingly.

Strasmore looked infinitely relieved.

"Conquest number two," he remarked comically, but Marlene was not paying attention. She had picked up a letter from the silver tray on the hall table and was looking at it with happy incredulity.

"Why—when did this come?" she asked breathlessly.

Jane glanced up.

"Postman just brought it," she replied. "Said he'd left it at the wrong house by mistake, and it has just been returned to the post-office. As if everyone in the village doesn't know who Miss *Beech* is! . . . and it addressed as plain as plain! so why they couldn't have brought it round themselves, instead of giving all that extra trouble! *Well!*—some people haven't got no sense, no sense whatever! Postman said he hoped it wasn't nothing very important, Miss Marlene—not a letter you ought to have had before breakfast."

Nothing very important! . . . when at last, after months of weary waiting, it was a letter from Hugh Clifford!

With complete forgetfulness of everything else, Marlene turned and ran upstairs with the precious letter clasped tightly in her hand. She couldn't open it with other people standing around, she must be alone; but on the narrow landing she bumped into Isabel who had been having a last look round at the room next to Chippendale's which she had prepared for Michael Strasmore.

"Why—where are you going?" Isabel asked blankly, as she saw the flushed excitement of Marlene's face.

The girl laughed. "Where am I going?" she repeated wryly—funny that question always seemed to be cropping up. "I'm going to my room to get tidy for dinner, that's all; shan't be long." And she closed her door firmly in the face of the elder woman's curiosity.

What had Hugh written? To say how much he loved her and longed to see her—perhaps even to tell her that at last he was on his way home. The same hope always took possession of her whenever his letters

came. She cut the envelope carefully open with a pair of small scissors—it was much too precious to tear open, as one usually did—and drew out its contents.

Only one written page! Her heart sank as she glanced at the date and saw that it had been written nearly four months ago.

Marlene dear,

Sorry not to have written for so long, but things have been difficult, and this is just a brief note to say that by the time you receive it I may be on my way home, and then we must meet and talk things over. I've had a touch of malaria—a rotten business—and still feel pretty shaky. It seems a long time since I left England, and I expect you have almost forgotten me.

Yours,

Hugh.

Marlene read the few lines again and again before, with a feeling of utter unreality, she sat down on the side of the bed and closed her eyes.

“It seems a long time since I left England, and I expect you have almost forgotten me——”

She spoke the words in a trembling whisper through the silent room, as if she was trying to make sense of them and to understand their real meaning.

I expect you have almost forgotten me!

The casual sort of remark any ordinary friend might have written! She looked again at the signature—just “Yours, Hugh,” without a single word of affection.

Written four months ago, so did that mean that he was *not* hers any longer? For all she knew he might be in England now, without having troubled to let her know! Something in her heart seemed to be crying out in passionate protest—no, no, he wouldn't do that! . . . he loves me—he would never be so cruel——

She looked again at the brief beginning of the letter.
Marlene dear!

Empty, meaningless words. Why, *Isabel* had once begun a letter to her like that!

. . . *and then we must meet and talk things over!* . . .

Useless to try to convince herself that he had been thinking of the future, and of their marriage. Of the future, perhaps! but one which no longer seemed to include her. Marlene closed her eyes again in a desperate attempt to shut out the sure conviction that this was the end of her dream of happiness; that when Hugh had written "I expect you have almost forgotten me" he had been reluctantly trying to admit that he had forgotten her!

A knock on the door, and Isabel's reproachful voice:

"*Marlene!* what are you doing? The dinner bell has rung twice and we're all waiting. Everything will be cold—at least, the potatoes will. The rest is just spam and salad, so of course they were cold to start with! . . . Do come down, *Marlene!*"

"I'm just coming."

She rose stiffly to her feet and thrust the letter out of sight in a drawer. Isabel was waiting for her at the top of the stairs.

"If I'd known we should have company, I'd have got some fish," she said regretfully. "Though there wasn't any in the shop this morning! I've apologised to Mr.

Strasmore, and told him how difficult catering still is, and he was charming and declared that food never worries him! Oh, by the way, have you seen his dog? He was so apologetic about the dear creature, so afraid I should mind! . . . As if I ever mind *anything*, as I told him!

Marlene laughed mirthlessly.

"I wish I could say the same."

"The great thing is to make up one's *mind*!" Isabel declared. "To make up one's mind *not* to mind anything, and then—well, you just don't! . . . It's quite simple, and really—you"—but Marlene had passed her and was already in the dining-room where Strasmore and Chippendale were standing together by the window, with Allsorts lying at his master's feet.

"Here we are!" Isabel said brightly. "So sorry to keep you both waiting. Now, what can we give our dear doggie for his dinner?"

"I've brought some biscuits," Strasmore told her. "And anyway, he can wait. He had a good breakfast before we started."

"You've evidently brought him up properly," Isabel agreed approvingly. "There is nothing like an early training, both for animals *and* children! Begin as you mean to go on is a sound rule, and——"

Mr. Chippendale ventured a mild interruption, a thing in which he rarely indulged.

"Well, what about beginning dinner, my dear?"

Isabel readily agreed. "Why, of course! You must all be starving." She carefully cut the roll of spam into slices and handed the plates. "I'm so glad there are four of us now," she told Strasmore. "I never like odd numbers. Not that we three haven't been completely

happy together, but now there are four of us it seems so much more like home," she added vaguely.

Chippendale looked across the table at Marlene with a covert smile. "And how is Hugh?" he asked.

She raised startled eyes.

"Hugh! . . . why—I—why do you ask?" she faltered.

The old man looked slightly apologetic.

"I saw the letter lying on the tray in the hall," he explained, "and recognising the stamp——" He turned to Strasmore. "As a boy I was a keen philatelist," he informed him. "Some day I must show you my collection——"

"And *have* you heard from Hugh?" Isabel asked eagerly. "I *am* so glad! How is he? Still abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes—but—but he says he may be coming home—before long," Marlene answered with difficulty. She looked at Strasmore with unconscious defiance to find his eyes upon her.

Isabel laughed and clapped her hands childishly.

"And then—the wedding bells will be ringing!" she said gaily. "Such excitement! I love weddings, don't you, Mr. Strasmore?"

"I can't remember that I've ever been to one."

She looked at him in utter amazement.

"Never *been* to one! How very strange! Still—some day you will go to your own, I am sure, and that will make up for all omissions. Be sure to invite *me*, won't you? As I have just said, I *love* weddings."

If she would only stop *talking*, Marlene thought desperately, but Isabel continued a friendly enquiry:

"And what else did Hugh say? It's some time since

you heard from him, isn't it? Though of course he's not to blame! We all know what a long time it takes for letters to come nowadays! Though Joan Fraser tells me she hears most *regularly* from her husband, and he's out East, too—Burma or somewhere—I suppose it all depends." She looked at Marlene critically. "Does your head ache? You look quite pale."

Marlene flushed sensitively.

"No, my head doesn't ache, and—no, I don't want any pudding, thank you."

Isabel's eyes opened wide.

"No pudding! when you know how fond you are of apple pudding. Think how disappointed Jane will be! I'm sure she made it as a special treat for you. Jane *adores* Marlene, Mr. Strasmore."

"One of the few, evidently," Marlene could not resist saying.

Isabel laughed gaily. "You will have your little joke, won't you? When she knows quite *well* how popular she is with *everyone*, Mr. Strasmore. I always say that very few girls can have more friends and admirers than Marlene has! except—perhaps—Gladdie Trounce! But there is no need for me to tell you about *her*, I am sure, as you are friends already. Such a delightful family, all of them—Stuart is a particular favourite of mine! You know Stuart, of course?"

"I have never met him. —"

"Really? Then we must arrange a meeting. Shall we ask them all to tea, Marlene? Perhaps Sunday would be a good day——"

There was no stopping her, until at last Mr. Chippendale rose from the table, declaring he must get on with the "good work."

"And it *is* good work," Isabel agreed. "Don't you think so, Mr. Strasmore? How my brother ever has the patience to make such exquisite little models is beyond my comprehension, and——"

"Please may we get down?" Marlene interrupted, and she, too, pushed back her chair and rose.

"And now you must show Mr. Strasmore the garden," Isabel insisted. "He's only seen the workshop so far—and you'd like to see the garden, wouldn't you?" she appealed. "I'd show you myself, only I have a Sewing Meeting at three o'clock, and I mustn't be late. I'm the most punctual person—I can never see why people can't always be punctual—it's only a question of keeping an eye on the clock——"

Marlene again interrupted——

"Do you care to see the garden, Mr. Strasmore? There isn't much of it, but what there is, is quite pretty."

She felt that anything would be preferable to Isabel's incessant chatter, and presently when she and Strasmore were out in the sunshine together, and she drew a long breath of relief, Strasmore asked in amusement—"Does Miss Wood always talk so volubly?"

"I'm afraid she does—I know I ought to be used to it, but sometimes—sometimes she gets on my nerves. And she means so well, poor dear!"

He laughed. "They say Hell is paved with good intentions," he remarked comically.

Marlene looked up at him.

"Do you think you will *really* like living here, with us?" she asked doubtfully. "We're an odd trio, as I suppose you've already discovered, haven't you?"

Their eyes met, and he answered quietly, "I am

quite *sure* I shall like living here—with you—all——” He stopped to admire a bed of rose bushes. “That is a very fine show, Miss Beech——”

“Yes——” But Marlene quickly averted her eyes, remembering how Hugh—the last time they were together—had picked a red rose which was still bravely blooming although it had been autumn, and had given it to her.

“For remembrance,” he had said with unusual emotion. “The last rose of summer.” Prophetic words, she thought bitterly, though at the time they had seemed ineffably sweet.

The last rose of summer! She still had it! A faded, dead thing which yet retained something of its exquisite perfume.

Perhaps that was prophetic, too! . . . a warning that she must not lose hope—a reminder that in spite of the strange letter which had struck such a death blow to her heart, the beauty of those happiest days of her life still lingered on—somewhere—and would one day come to life again.

“That was a big sigh,” Strasmore said suddenly, and Marlene started and looked at him resentfully.

“Did I sigh? I’ve nothing to sigh about.”

“So I imagine.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I envy you. You have a lovely home, and—so Miss Wood says—countless friends——”

“*And* admirers,” Marlene interrupted flippantly.

“Don’t forget the admirers, please!”

“Friends are of far greater account,” he insisted.

“Are you such a believer in friendship?”

“Of the right sort, yes! I think a real friendship

must be the greatest and most lasting happiness in the world."

There was a brief silence before she said bitterly,

"*Nothing* lasts! . . . you think it will, and then——" she snapped her fingers defiantly, before she laughed a little self-consciously. "I don't know why I should be saying all this to you, Mr. Strasmore—anyone would imagine we were the greatest of friends."

"As I hope we shall be," Strasmore answered quietly.

She looked up at him, angry and embarrassed because her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"You don't mean that," she said quickly. "You don't——" she stopped, as Allsorts, who had been following faithfully at his master's heels, suddenly gave a tremendous, warning bark.

"There's a car at the gate," Strasmore said.

Marlene brushed a hasty hand across her eyes.

"It's Gladys Trounce." She laughed shakily. "I expect it's you she's come to see," she told him.

Strasmore frowned. "Then—if you'll excuse me, I'll see how friend Chippendale is getting along with the good work——" and before there was time for her to protest, he was striding away towards the little workshop.

Marlene looked after him with baffled eyes. Not very polite, she thought—and then as Gladys called a cheery "Coo-ee!" she turned reluctantly to meet her.

"Hullo!" It was not a very enthusiastic greeting and Gladys raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Anything wrong?" she enquired. "I've just called with a message for dear Isabel, from dear Mamma!"

I don't believe it, Marlene thought, you've come to

see Michael! *Michael!* how absurd, after so short an acquaintance, to think of him by his Christian name! Still, he *had* said that he hoped they would be friends!

"Isabel's gone to a Sewing Meeting," she said.

"Oh! . . . well, in that case——" Gladys hesitated before she asked with overdone carelessness—"Was that Michael Strasmore you were talking to?"

"Yes."

There was a short silence before the elder girl asked, "What do you think of him?"

Marlene shook her head.

"I hardly know him, but he seems—nice. Do *you* like him? Where did you meet him?"

"Down at Salisbury—when I was driving for the Red Cross. Some time ago now—he was invalided out. Is he going to stay with you?"

"Yes, I think so."

Gladys laughed. "You're not very enthusiastic! . . . Has he brought that awful dog with him, a great ugly brute called Allsorts?"

"I like Allsorts!"

"You *would*!" Gladys submitted dryly, and the silence fell again until she asked in a puzzled voice, "What's wrong with you, Marlene? I expected to find you all up in the air and bubbling over with happiness—and you look like a wet week!"

Marlene flushed. "Bubbling over with happiness! . . . why on earth *should* I be?"

"*Why*?" Gladys stared at her. "Then— isn't it true?" she asked.

"Isn't *what* true?"

"That Hugh Clifford is home! . . . Stuart declares that he saw him in London last night."

CHAPTER III

MARLENE had always prided herself on the coolness with which she could meet any emergency, but standing there in the bright sunshine, with Gladys Trounce's interested, critical eyes upon her, she felt utterly stunned and at a loss. As if she had suddenly come up against an impassable barrier—as if someone had turned a glaring searchlight upon her face—or some colossal shock had stunned her brain, making her quite incapable of speech, of coherent thought.

She could feel the colour fading from her cheeks, as she struggled in vain to say something, or to laugh, but she couldn't do either! She just *couldn't*!

"Of course Stuart may have been mistaken," Gladys said awkwardly. "But . . . he was so sure! . . . he knows Hugh quite well, doesn't he? I mean——" She stopped, obviously embarrassed, and with a tremendous effort Marlene at last found her voice.

"He was probably right. I heard from Hugh—only this morning—to say he might be here—quite soon." She forced a high-pitched little laugh. "It was probably he who was trying to get through to me on the 'phone last night—and again this morning—but something's gone wrong with our line—and so——"

Gladys interrupted her. "It was all right this morning. Mother got through to Miss Wood—soon after breakfast——"

"Oh, did she?" Marlene felt as if she was slowly regaining consciousness after an anæsthetic, and at last managed a shaky laugh. "Well, I expect Stuart was

mistaken—for, of course, if—Hugh was in London—I should have heard at once. Where did he think he saw him?”

Her hands were tightly gripped in the pockets of her little woolly coat as she waited for a reply.

“It was in a restaurant—I forget which one. Stuart was just leaving, he said—when he saw Hugh come in—at least, he *thought* it was Hugh, but, of course, as you say—you’d be sure to have heard if he was really in London.” She looked across the garden to Chippendale’s workshop. “May I go and speak to Michael?”

“Of course—I’ll come with you.”

Marlene slipped a hand through Gladys’ arm—not with any feeling of affection, but because—somehow—it seemed difficult to walk steadily, for that Stuart had *not* been mistaken, she knew well enough—Hugh was in London—perhaps had been there for several days—and he had not troubled to let her know!

Allsorts let forth an unfriendly bark when he saw Gladys, but at a word from his master, he was instantly silent, though he slunk away out of sight behind Chippendale’s work-bench, and lay down, growling a protest.

“Allsorts never liked me, did he?” Gladys said lightly as she and Michael shook hands. “And how are you? It’s a long time since we met.”

“Very well, thanks—and you?”

“On top of the world!” Gladys declared, but there was a certain constraint in her manner. “You must come and meet my family—I’ve told them about you.”

Mr. Chippendale, sitting at the bench in his shirt-sleeves, shifted his spectacles to the end of his nose,

and looked up from his work with a slight frown. He objected to an audience, except at his own special invitation, and he was not very partial to Gladys Trounce.

She had once laughed at a model of a Dachshund he had made, accusing him of being unpatriotic and pro-German, a thing he had neither forgotten nor forgiven.

His usually mild voice was slightly acid when he spoke. "Do you mind moving a little, if you please? You are blocking out the light!"

"So sorry!" Gladys apologised. She moved out into the sunshine, turning to Strasmore with a smile. "Come and see my car! . . . it's not too bad, considering it's been jacked up for four years. Do you remember when I drove you to Hospital over that awful bumpy road, and how you cursed me? It was the first time we met, wasn't it?"

"And are you still driving for the Red Cross? But I suppose not." She shook her head.

"Heavens, no. I've done with all that and am enjoying life again—as much as it's possible!" She glanced back over her shoulder, and seeing that Marlene was still with Mr. Chippendale in the workshop, she said with a little laugh, "I'm afraid I've just made rather a bad *faux pas*—though it wasn't *my* fault! . . . Poor Marlene! She looked terribly upset."

"Upset?"

"Yes, you see—she's engaged—or, at least, I suppose she is—to a man named Hugh Clifford. He's been out East for—quite a long time, and last night—Stuart—my brother—saw him in London—I thought Marlene would be sure to know he was home, and I just mentioned that Stuart had seen him—but she *didn't* know!

And it was frightfully embarrassing. If course, I said at once that Stuart must have been mistaken——”

“And do you think he was mistaken?” Strasmore asked disinterestedly.

She shook her head.

“I’m quite sure he wasn’t! . . . Stuart never liked Hugh Clifford—you see, he’s keen on Marlene himself——” She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, there it is! . . . Unlucky, wasn’t it?”

“Very.”

They walked a few steps in silence, until Gladys spoke again. “So you are staying at Green Elms! . . . Indefinitely?”

“I’ve made no plans.”

She looked up at him with a sudden softening of expression. “It’s good to see you again, Michael.”

“It’s kind of you to say so.”

She flushed and bit her lip.

“So I am still—unforgiven?” she asked with an attempt at lightness.

“There was never any question of forgiveness,” Strasmore answered. “This is a free country—so we are told—and one may say what one pleases.”

They had reached the gate, but when he took a step forward to open it for her, she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“Won’t you be friends with me again, Michael?” she asked pleadingly. “You don’t know how glad I am to see you.”

Strasmore laughed.

“‘Gold—what can it *not* do, and *undo*,’” he quoted cynically. “I wonder if you would be so ‘glad’ to see me, if I were still a sick man, living on my pay?”

He shook her hand from his arm and opened the gate.

"The car appears to be in good condition," he said. Gladys did not reply, but after watching him for a moment in baffled silence, she got into the driving seat.

"If you've nothing more to say," she submitted unsteadily, "I suppose I may as well go. Will you come to our place one day? Mother will expect you."

"I shall be delighted."

She laughed then. "Yes, you sound as if you will," she said drily. "Well, good-bye——" and with a careless wave of her hand she drove away.

Strasmore looked after her with inscrutable eyes, thinking how strangely unmoved he had been by their meeting. Perhaps after all, there was some truth in Marlene's bitter assertion that *nothing* lasts! Not that he had ever seriously cared for Gladys, but they had met at a time when he was ill, lonely and depressed, wondering why he should have been condemned to live on, while so many other men, who had every wish and reason to live, had been ruthlessly wiped out. She had been a gay companion, determinedly lifting him out of his despondency and making him feel that after all, life was not such a bad show!

Until Fate had taken a hand, and the amazing thing had happened when old Timothy Jarrow, whom he could hardly remember, but who he vaguely knew had been a friend of his father's, had died, leaving a colossal fortune, the bulk of it to "Michael Strasmore—the son of my greatest friend, John Strasmore."

Money meant nothing to Michael—he had felt embarrassed rather than elated by his sudden inheritance—though in a way it had served him well, seeing that it was following the announcement of Jarrow's death

in the papers, and the published details of his will, that he had chanced to overhear Gladys Trounce's conversation with—he had even forgotten the other girl's name.

He had been convalescent then—lying on a couch outside an open window at the hospital, and he had been wakened from sleep by their voices and laughter.

"*Marry* him!—you bet I shall, now he's come into half a million! Money makes all the difference. Oh yes, I like him all right, though sometimes I find him a dull dog—but I'm not in love with him, and I shouldn't have let things go any further if this hadn't happened! I should so hate to be poor. . . . Has he asked me to marry him? No, not yet, but I can manage him all right—I've never met a man yet I couldn't manage——"

Gladys' voice—Strasmore remembered the blank feeling of unreality which had taken possession of him as, still not fully awake, he had half raised himself from the cushions, only to fall back again in sudden, overpowering weakness.

They had said a lot more—these two girls—laughing and exchanging confidences, until with a final confident word from Gladys, "Well, you'll be able to congratulate me next time we meet—" they had parted.

An unlucky chance or a lucky one? Lucky, Strasmore told himself as he turned away from the gate and towards the house, for now, having met her again, he knew that he had never had any serious regard for Gladys, and that had their friendship ripened into anything deeper, it could never have led to happiness. He had told her of that overheard conversation—an unpleasant scene, for though she had defiantly treated the whole matter as a joke, declaring she had not been

serious, and that if he hadn't a shilling in the world she would still care for him, he had not believed her. Even then—nearly three years ago—his paramount feeling had been one of anger rather than of personal injury, for when at last she had dissolved into tears, upbraiding him and declaring that he could never have loved her, he had laughed and answered :

"I have never loved any girl—and I hope I never shall."

Did that avowal still hold good? Unconsciously Strasmore raised a hand to his breast pocket where the photograph of a girl he had never seen until to-day was hidden amongst letters and other oddments.

Would he find that she was any different to the rest, once he got to know her really well?

By her own admission she cared for another man and was already engaged to him.

It was a strange world in which Fate, more often than not, seemed to play the winning hand. Strange how that photograph had come into his possession—stranger still that it should have been Marlene herself who had stopped him that morning as he walked wearily along through the sunshine to ask, "Where are you going?"

Well, here he was! He looked up at the little house with a warm expression of gratitude in his sombre eyes.

The voluble Isabel—Mr. Chippendale—Marlene—already he felt that they had been his friends for years, although a few hours ago he had met none of them.

Jane appeared in the doorway.

"Your room's quite ready, sir, if you'd care to see it. It's the one at the top of the stairs—you can't miss

it." And then, as Allsorts bounded towards her, wagging his tail, "What about that nice boney-woney I promised you?" she encouraged him.

Strasmore laughed. "You'll spoil him," he warned her.

Jane sniffed. "Give me a dog, and you can have all the men as ever was," she retorted, and then apologetically, "Begging your pardon, sir."

"No need to apologise," Strasmore assured her cheerfully. "Go and get your bone, Allsorts." And the dog, who had been looking up at him questioningly, as if waiting for permission, obediently followed Jane to the kitchen.

Strasmore went up to his room, "the one at the top of the stairs."

Quite a small room, with white walls, chintz curtains and a few bits of old mahogany furniture. Its windows stood wide open, and on the dressing-table Isabel had placed a bowl of the red roses cut from the bushes he had admired a short time ago.

A *homely* room, speaking of peace and friendliness, and—best of all—a welcome!

Strasmore walked to the window and looked out over the garden.

"And I said 'If there's peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble might hope for it here'!"

And find it, he thought gratefully.

There was a step on the path outside, and Marlene's slender figure came into view.

She was walking slowly, her head downbent, her

hands thrust into the pockets of her little woolly coat. Hands which were tightly clenched, Strasmore instinctively knew, and his tall figure grew tense as he watched until she was out of sight amongst the trees.

She was unhappy ; he knew that well enough—and knew why.

For an instant he hesitated then, turning quickly, he went downstairs again and out into the garden to find her.

* * * *

“ Everything all right, my dear ? ” Chippendale asked mildly when he and Marlene were alone in the little workshop. They had been speaking of quite ordinary subjects, and Marlene had prided herself that she looked and behaved very much as usual, but Chippendale always knew when things went wrong, and it was no use trying to deceive him.

He was not in the least inquisitive about other people's affairs, but his natural kindness and understanding of human nature made him quick to sense trouble, arousing his anxiety to help.

Marlene had often confided in him—things of small importance, and had received simple advice and comfort, but to-day—because the cloud which was blotting out her sunshine concerned Hugh Clifford—she felt that, even to Chippendale, she could not speak of it.

“ My head aches, that's all,” she answered. “ I suppose because I sat so long in the sunshine this morning without a hat—waiting for Isabel.” She tried to laugh. “ I shall be all right presently.”

She picked up the diminutive figure of a man which

had been lying amongst a pile of shavings, a rather down-at-heel sort of man, hatless and slightly bowed, with a heavy load on his back.

"This is something new for you!" she said in surprise, for Chippendale usually confined his efforts to animals and birds. "Who is it?" she asked, for in a vague way it reminded her of Michael Strasmore as she had first seen him, walking along the road.

Chippendale pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead. "That! Oh, it's just an idea," he submitted, a little self-consciously. Chippendale was always rather shy of speaking about his hobby. "It will be called 'Loneliness'—if ever I finish it."

"Loneliness!" Marlene repeated; she laid the little figure aside. "Are *you* ever lonely, Chippendale?"

The old man jerked his spectacles back to their proper position on the bridge of his nose, and it was a moment before he answered simply, "Strange as it may seem to you, my dear, I am never less lonely than when I am alone. Perhaps you cannot understand that?"

Marlene drew her shoulders together in a little shiver.

"I *hate* being alone," she said vehemently. "I'd rather—rather have the devil himself for company than be alone——"

A faint smile crossed Chippendale's face and he shook his head.

"At some time or another we all have the devil for company, I believe," he said quietly. "And he usually comes in unrecognisable guise—that of a friend." He was silent for a moment before he went on: "I have not many friends—I never have had, perhaps because I don't need them as some people do—but, strangely enough, Strasmore is a man whose company I could

tolerate indefinitely—and even enjoy. I hope he will stay with us.”

Marlene looked at him in surprise.

“You are evidently quite sure that *he* is not the devil in disguise them?” she submitted.

Mr. Chippendale picked up one of his little tools and looked at its pointed edge with careful criticism.

“Aren’t you?” he questioned mildly, and then as she made a half-movement towards the door, “Stay, if you care to, my dear—I am not very busy this afternoon.”

“I think I’ll go for a walk—it may do my head good.”

“Not forgetting the steam-kettle,” Chippendale said quietly.

She looked back at him. “The steam-kettle?”

The old man smiled and nodded. “Yes, when it’s up to its neck in hot water, it still continues to sing, remember.”

Up to its neck in hot water! But I’m up to *my* neck in icy-cold water, Marlene thought bitterly, as she walked away through the bright sunshine. Yes, that was how she felt—as if her body was frozen and every hope of happiness dead.

Hugh was in London, and he had not troubled to let her know; it was the only thing of importance in the world.

Stuart Trounce had not been mistaken; it was impossible to mistake Hugh. There was something about him—to her, at all events—which made him stand out head and shoulders above all other men.

And he no longer loved her; she knew it as surely as if he had told her so, face to face.

The thought of Isabel’s commiseration and the

inevitable gossip of Gladys and her friends was more than she could bear.

Jilted! . . . that's what they would say, even though she and Hugh had never been definitely engaged.

The confines of the charming little garden seemed like prison walls from which she felt she must escape—somewhere in the open—and be free!

She was at the gate when Michael Strasmore spoke behind her.

"May I come with you—wherever you are going?"

She glanced back at him with unfriendly eyes.

"I don't know where I *am* going—nowhere in particular—but you may come—if you care to!"

"Thank you."

They walked a few steps along the quiet road without speaking until Strasmore said:

"My room is charming, as I had imagined it would be! . . . By the way"—he whistled shrilly, and almost immediately the ungainly body of Allsorts leapt the closed gate behind them and came pelting down the road.

"Do you always take him with you—wherever you go?" Marlene asked.

"Yes, whenever it's possible. He is my one faithful friend."

"Perhaps you are lucky to have *one*! It's more than most people have."

"You don't mean that!"

"Don't I? Perhaps you're right—you seem to know so much about human nature—and—people! Or is it that you have never been—disappointed in anyone?"

Strasmore laughed. "I was—once. Not that it was a very severe blow."

She looked at him with reluctant interest.

"And what did you do then?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Grinned and bore it! It doesn't pay to wear one's heart on one's sleeve, you know, no matter how seriously that vital organ may be affected."

"Perhaps your 'vital organ,' as you call it, *wasn't* seriously affected," Marlene said.

It was a moment before he answered.

"And supposing it had been, nobody would ever have been the wiser! I dislike—pity—and the world can't pity those who—refuse to—ask for it, or to look as if they need it. People are usually ready to take one at one's face value, even if in reality that value is only an elaborate camouflage."

A sudden thought flashed into Marlene's unhappy mind.

An elaborate camouflage! . . . Why not write to Hugh—if she could find out where he was—and tell him, before he had the chance to tell her, that she wished their friendship—attachment—whatever it had been—to end?

It would be a way out of her present unhappy position if she could tell Isabel, and anyone who was interested, that it was she who had ceased to care for Hugh and had asked him to set her free.

An elaborate camouflage! . . . she could do it! Pride would help her, and the dread of pity and condolences. Strange that this man, whom she hardly knew and who certainly knew nothing about her, should unconsciously have held out the hand of friendship to show her a way by which she could defeat at least some of the troubles and perplexities which seemed to be surrounding her on all sides.

Strasmore spoke suddenly, pointing to a rambling old house against a background of trees.

"That's a fine looking place. Who lives there?"

She made a little grimace.

"Your friends the Trounces! Would you care to call?"

He shook his head. "Not unless you particularly wish it." He laughed. "You know, I can hardly believe it is only a few hours since you and I first met. It seems so much longer ago."

"You mean—the time has dragged so?" she asked ironically.

"No, I didn't mean that," but he did not explain.

They were near the big double gate which led to the Trounces' house and Marlene said suddenly:

"There's Stuart—Gladys' brother." She waved a greeting to the man who had stopped in the drive at sight of them and then came on again with a slightly suspicious glance at Strasmore.

Marlene introduced them. "Mr. Strasmore is a friend of Gladys," she explained. "I expect she has told you?"

"Yes," the two men shook hands. "Were you coming to our place, Marlene?"

"No. We were just going for a short walk—nowhere in particular. Oh, look, Mr. Strasmore! Allsorts is chasing a cat."

Michael turned quickly, calling to the dog who, for once in his life, was too excited and engrossed in the chase to pay attention.

"Come *here*, sir!" Michael shouted, and set off in hot pursuit.

Stuart laughed. "Not a beauty exactly, is he? The dog, I mean, not your Lonely Soldier."

"Why do you call him that?"

"It was Gladdie's description, not mine. She said he once told her he hadn't a relative in the world."

Stuart was looking at Marlene intently. "How long is he going to stay with you?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea; he only came this morning."

"I suppose you'll make him so darned comfortable, he'll stay till the crack of doom," Stuart remarked gloomily.

Marlene laughed a little absently, for her thoughts were far away, and it was with a great effort that she said presently:

"Oh, by the way, I hear you saw Hugh Clifford in London last night!"

"Yes—did you know he was home? But of course you did."

She shook her head. "No—and he's not likely to let me know." She spoke with gay indifference, forcing herself to look at him. "You see, Stuart, 'all is over between us'—in the words of—whoever said it."

Stuart flushed with dull incredulity.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Not that——"

She interrupted lightly. "I mean what I say—that all is over between us—between my humble self and Hugh! . . . How was he looking, by the way?"

Stuart drew a hard breath and suddenly gripped her hand.

"Is it—really true?" he asked huskily.

Marlene laughed. "Of course it's true! Why shouldn't it be? We haven't met for—so long, and as your experienced sister always says, out of sight is

out of mind! Still"—she drew her hand away—"I hope he was looking well. Did you speak to him?"

"Yes." Stuart's young face was alight with happiness. "As a matter of fact—though I shouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't told me what you have—he'd got a girl with him. What did you say, Marlene?"

"Nothing." Her lips still smiled, though they felt so cold and stiff. "I hope she was a good looker," she submitted lightly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not too bad! I've forgotten her name——"

"Oh! Then you were introduced?"

"Yes. Clifford tells me he landed a week ago."

Marlene nodded. "Yes—a week ago!" she echoed mechanically. "Is he staying in London?"

"Yes—at the Clifton. Here comes your Lonely Soldier——"

Allsorts was walking at his master's heels now, looking a little ashamed and downcast.

"Did he get the cat?" Marlene asked with an effort.

"No." Strasmore laughed. "He got his nose scratched for his pains." He touched the dog's shaggy head in a caress of forgiveness. "Perhaps that will teach you a lesson," he told him severely.

Allsorts wagged his tail very slowly, and there was a short silence before Marlene said:

"Well, we must be going—Jane insists on tea punctually at four; what time is it now?"

"Only just after three," Strasmore told her.

She raised her brows. "Is that all!" When it seemed a lifetime since Gladys had driven up to the gate of Green Elms.

Not forgetting the steam-kettle !

" See you again soon," she told Stuart gaily.

" Nice boy," Strasmore said as they retraced their steps.

" Boy ? " Marlene laughed. " He's twenty-five . . . "

" It seems young to me—I am ten years his senior."

" Quite an old gentleman ! " she chaffed him.

Unconsciously she quickened her steps, remembering that the letter box at the corner was cleared at a quarter to four. She must write to Hugh before then so he would get it by the first post in the morning. What could she say ? As little as possible.

Isabel appeared in the doorway.

" Such a thrilling piece of news ! " she called gaily. " But, of course, you have heard already ! . . . Hugh is home and—in London ! So we must expect him at any moment——" She looked at Strasmore. " You'll like Hugh," she told him. " Such a *charming* man ! . . . isn't he, Marlene ? But that's an absurd question, isn't it ? Come in, both of you—we're going to have tea early, as I promised Jane she could go to the pictures, and they begin at five."

She led the way into the sitting-room.

" I hope you like your room, Mr. Strasmore—Jane tells me you have seen it, and—why, he's gone ! " For Michael had slipped away.

Isabel took Marlene by the shoulders and kissed her.

" What I have always said about the happy ending ! " she submitted gaily, and then as she felt the girl's body stiffen in her grasp, " Why—is anything the matter ? I thought you'd be simply bubbling over with joy, and——"

Marlene moved away from her.

"You'll have to know sooner or later, so I may as well tell you at once," she said with an effort. Her voice died away and she bit her lip hard to stop its trembling.

"To know—— To know—*what*?" Isabel demanded.

Remember the steam-kettle! . . .

Marlene raised her head defiantly.

"To know that—Hugh and I—have finished with one another," she said calmly. "It's my fault—I—you see, I found I didn't—care for him—after all! . . . It's so long since we met, and—well, it's all over."

Isabel collapsed into a chair.

"All—over!" she echoed blankly. "But I thought——"

She stared at Marlene, but there was nothing to be gained from her expression, and after a moment of profound silence, Isabel laughed.

"Well, I'm not surprised," she declared with deep satisfaction. "Haven't I always said—or, at least, if I haven't *said* it, it's what I've always thought—that you and Hugh were not *really* suited! I'm sorry for him, of course! . . . He must be terribly cut-up! But, for your sake, I'm glad! . . . 'The best is yet to be'—as Shakespeare puts it—or wasn't it Shakespeare? Perhaps it was Kipling! . . . However, it's so *true*, whoever said it! And I know Chippendale will be glad! He never approved of Hugh—though don't tell him I said so. Poor Hugh! After the dreadful time he's had fighting those horrid Japs—to come home to face this disappointment—— Still, it's all for the best! And it simply means that Mr. Right hasn't come along yet—though I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't already *just*

round the corner! . . . Why, where are you going? It's nearly tea-time, and I've told Jane she may go to the pictures——"

"Where are you going?" The same hopeless question to which there is no reply possible, Marlene thought broken-heartedly, as, feeling she could bear no more, she turned and ran upstairs.

CHAPTER IV

AS soon as Marlene had dropped her letter into the pillar-box, she felt that she would have given ten years of her life to be able to recall it.

Supposing it was all a mistake and there was an adequate explanation why Hugh had not let her know that he had returned home? Supposing—yes, but she could not forget the cold abruptness of his last letter, or that only last night he had been in the company of another girl!

Michael Strasmore's words echoed like a kindly warning through her mind as she turned slowly away.

"The world can't pity those who refuse to ask for pity, or to look as if they need it——"

At any rate, pity was a thing she would never invite—she would make up her mind to be gay and happy—outwardly at all events—so that nobody should ever guess her heart was breaking.

But—was it? Gladys declared it was nonsense to say hearts could break—just as ridiculous as it was to say that love lasts for ever!

"If it does, why are there so many miserable marriages?" Gladys demanded scornfully. There was the postman—already cycling up the road to clear the box, and again Marlene's courage failed her as she realised that in a few fateful moments, her letter would be out of reach for ever! She knew the postman well—Bishop, his name was, and Chippendale had sometimes given him little carved animals for his children—not quite perfect models, of course—still, Bishop had seemed delighted with them, so perhaps—if she asked him——

But this afternoon Bishop was apparently in a great hurry, and before she could find the courage to stop him, with a cheery "Afternoon, miss," he had passed her and was beyond recall.

So there was nothing to do but wait and see what Hugh would say in reply. An eternal waiting it seemed, though it was only a few mornings later that—creeping downstairs in her dressing-gown very early to see if the letters had arrived—she found one addressed in Hugh's handwriting.

Very brief—only a few lines, but they told her all she dreaded to know.

Dear Marlene,

I have just received your letter. I understand perfectly, and don't blame you in the least. I, too, have changed, so we must both blame the jolly old war, and our long separation. All the best—Yours, Hugh.

So she had been right, and he no longer cared for her. Unkind that at such a moment the sun should shine

with dazzling splendour, and that from the bathroom upstairs she should hear Strasmore whistling cheerfully.

Strasmore had grown much more cheerful—"Human"—Isabel called it) during his short sojourn at Green Elms.

"No doubt it's because he feels so at home and comfortable," Isabel said complacently. "A home-lover he really is, even though he has never had a home of his own, poor man!"

This morning he was whistling the refrain of a song which had been extremely popular during the last months of the war, and one for which Marlene had always felt a great affection.

"I'll be seeing you——" So often she had listened to it on the wireless and on the 'Trounces' gramophone—always with a sort of aching happiness, feeling that it might be Hugh telling her how constantly he thought of her.

"I'll be seeing you
In all the old familiar places
Heart and mind embraces—all day through!
. . . In every lovely summer's day—
Everything that's bright and gay—
I'll always think of you.
I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is blue,
I'll be looking at the moon—
But I'll be seeing—you!"

With a sudden feeling of overpowering loss and loneliness, she sat down on the bottom stair and hid her face in her hands. It was the end of everything—all she had dreamed of and hoped for.

"I wish I could die!" she thought desolately.

Something gently touched her arm, and with a little gasp she looked up to find Allsorts standing beside her, one paw tentatively raised, while he watched her with questioning sympathy in his brown eyes. "My one faithful friend"—so his master had called him.

"Oh, dear doggie," Marlene whispered, and as she put her arms round his shaggy neck, Allsorts gently licked her cheek which was suddenly wet with tears. Neither of them realised that the whistling from the bathroom had stopped, or that from the landing above Strasmore was looking down on them, his mouth set in grim lines, before with a muttered imprecation, he moved quietly away to his bedroom.

Marlene destroyed Hugh's letter. During Jane's absence from the kitchen, she burnt it in the grate together with all the others she had ever received from him.

"And that is the very end," she told herself bitterly, as she turned away from the little pile of grey ashes. "I will never love anyone again."

* * * * *

"Marlene seems very gay and happy," Isabel remarked to Strasmore, later in the week, "I think it must be *your* presence in the house," she submitted with a friendly smile. "She must have found it dull all these years, with only two old fogies like my brother and myself for company! . . . I am so *glad* she now has someone nearer her own age!"

"You flatter me," Strasmore answered.

Isabel shook a reproving finger at him.

"Now, now! . . . None of us are ever any older than we *feel*!" she declared. "And though I am well

past middle age myself, there are times when I feel just a girl!" She waited for the obvious compliment, which was not forthcoming. "Poor dear, he is so *shy* with women," she defended him to herself, before she rattled on—"And this break with Hugh Clifford! You never knew him, of course, but he was *very* good-looking, and he and Marlene always seemed so devoted—as far as one could *tell*! . . . I simply couldn't believe it when she told me it was all finished! However, no doubt it's all for the best, and she certainly doesn't appear to be grieving, does she? Not that she was ever one to wear her heart on her sleeve for a daw to peck at! Is it a daw, by the way—or some other bird?"

"Daw is correct, I believe," Strasmore told her gravely, and he thought of Marlene as he had seen her crouched at the foot of the staircase, her face hidden in her hands while Allsorts stood by, one clumsy paw slightly raised, as if uncertain whether to offer consolation or not. Marlene and Allsorts had been firm friends since that morning.

"I am not sure that I ought not to be jealous!" Strasmore told her, when, on one occasion, Allsorts had apparently deserted him to follow Marlene on her bicycle to the village.

"Jealous—of me?" she asked lightly. "Very well, let's both call him and see who he goes to! Fair play, now!"

Allsorts was lying full length on the grass in the sunshine and they both stood back at equal distances, while Marlene raised her hand.

"One—two—when I say 'three'—we'll both call him. Now—one—two—*three*!"

They called the dog's name simultaneously, and Allsorts started up, looking from one to the other in sleepy astonishment, before he bounded towards his master.

"There! . . . you see!" Marlene laughed, but she felt faintly resentful. Was she never to have someone who would place her first and foremost—not even a dog?

If only something unexpected would happen, she often thought—something quite different to the ordinary routine of life! It would be such a relief to get away to a fresh place, amongst fresh people—somewhere where she would not so continually be reminded of the lost happiness which, in spite of all her efforts, she could not forget! It was Gladys Trounce who quite unintentionally came to her aid. Marlene had avoided Gladys lately—afraid of her out-spokenness and blunt questioning, fully conscious that although she pretended to believe that the break with Hugh Clifford had been Marlene's own doing, at heart she was unconvinced.

"I'm going to London for a fortnight, to stay with Dollie," Gladys announced one morning when the two girls met outside Mrs. Parsons' shop where, as usual, Marlene was waiting for Isabel to finish gossiping.

Dollie was Gladys' sister, married to a wealthy man many years her senior, who allowed her an entirely free hand, both with his money and with her own life.

"Why don't you come, too?" Gladys suggested.

"Me?" Marlene opened her lovely eyes wide.

"Whatever would Dollie say?"

"She'd be delighted. You know, there's tons of

room in their flat, and she'll give us a topping time. Besides—I think a change would do you good ! ”

Marlene laughed. “ Do I look so pale and wan ? ” she asked ironically.

Gladys shook her head. “ No, but this place gets on one's nerves after a time, doesn't it—especially now they've cleared the camp. The boys *did* liven things up a bit, didn't they ? But now—well, who *is* there to talk to ? ”

“ Nobody very exciting, certainly,” Marlene agreed. “ Always excepting Stuart and—Mr. Strasmore.”

“ Do you find *him* exciting ? ” Gladys asked a little constrainedly.

Marlene hesitated. “ I like him,” she said at last, “ and I'm getting to like him better—I think we all are ; even Chippendale—and as a rule he has no time for strangers.”

Strangers ! . . . but she knew that Strasmore had never seemed like a stranger, not even when they first met.

There was a brief silence before Gladys spoke again.

“ With all deference to you, my dear, I can't for the life of me understand why Michael stays in this God-forsaken village. If I'd a twentieth part of his money, I'd have the whale of a time ! He's frightfully rich, though nobody would think so, would they ? I haven't seen him in a decent suit of clothes, yet ! ”

Marlene frowned and glanced again towards the shop door, wondering why she should resent Gladys's words—though they were certainly true—about his clothes, anyway ! She didn't quite believe that he could really be rich, or why should he be content to live so quietly, and to dress in such an—yes, almost shabby way ?

"Comfortable, and homely," Isabel called it. "I don't like men who look as if they have just been turned out of Oxford Street, or do I mean Bond Street?"

Marlene loved money, though she had never had very much—she loved beautiful clothes, too. She thought suddenly of Hugh Clifford—always so smart and perfectly groomed. All women had admired him, and had been proud to be seen with him. She started when Gladys spoke again.

"You come with me to Dollie's—I'll ring her up and tell her I'm bringing you. And pack all your glad rags—we're sure to go about a lot. Dollie knows everyone worth knowing."

Marlene made a rueful grimace.

"My glad rags are just *rags*!" she declared. "I haven't a smart frock to my name! Here comes Isabel—at last——"

"Then I'll be off," Gladys said quickly. She was not very partial to Isabel, and intensely disliked being called "Gladdie." "I won't forget to ring Dollie and tell her——" were her final words.

"Was that Gladdie?" Isabel asked unnecessarily as she climbed into the car. "What has she to talk about this morning? She always has so *much* to say—such a chatterbox!"

Marlene suppressed a smile as she answered, "She wants me to go to London with her—to Dollie's."

"Now, I call that most *kind*!" Isabel declared. "A change will do you so much good. It must be years since you had a real holiday! And with Dollie you will have a wonderful time! Dinners! . . . dances! . . . All the fun of the fair! . . . I hope you said you would go?"

"I didn't. I can't live up to Dollie's idea of things. She always dresses so beautifully—even now—though how she does it I can't imagine, with these horrid coupons. I haven't a single one left!"

"No doubt she is *au fait* with the Black Market," Isabel said cheerfully. "Or that her husband is! . . . Such an excellent business man is probably able to get anything either of them requires."

"They've got the money, too, remember," Marlene reminded her.

Isabel did not reply, but later that evening she followed the girl into the garden where she was wandering restlessly about, trying not to see the sunset—trying not to think of the hundred and one memories it recalled—trying to persuade herself that she didn't care, that nothing mattered!

"Gladdie has been on the 'phone," Isabel told her. "She has rung Dollie, and Dollie is delighted—simply *delighted*, as I knew she would be—at the thought of a visit from you! You're to go on Thursday, and——" Marlene interrupted determinedly——

"I can't go—I haven't an evening frock to my name, and you know what Dollie is. I should simply hate it."

"Now, now," Isabel protested gaily. "There are still plenty of lovely clothes to be bought in London, and you will enjoy a day's shopping. Besides, I have told Gladdie you *will* go, and——"

Marlene laughed. "I haven't the money, Bella dear," she said more quietly. "And—anyway—I'm not very keen," she added, but it was not the truth—for she felt that London would be a welcome way of escape, and would perhaps bring longed for forgetfulness.

"Money!" Isabel said brightly, and half shyly she put something into Marlene's hand. "There! . . . that's for you! It's only a small cheque, but it will help! No, not a word! For the last five years I have made up my mind that as soon as the war ended, and if I could afford it, you should have a *real* holiday—no expense to be spared! You've been goodness itself to me and to Chippendale—I don't know *what* we should have done without you!—though, I suppose, if you hadn't been here, we should have managed *somehow*! Now, you're to go on Thursday—and no more argument. It's not as if we shall be left *quite* alone! . . . We've got Michael and he's already one of the family!"

Marlene opened her eyes wide.

"Do you call him—Michael?" she asked in amazement.

Isabel nodded and smiled. "Why not? I like to be friendly with *everyone*, as you know—I asked his permission first—I said 'May I call you Michael?' and he said——" She broke off as Jane called shrilly from the house,

"Miss Isa-bel! . . . Miss Isa-bel!"

"I must go," Isabel said hurriedly. "I expect it's the man come to see about the gas-stove—at *last*!" and she tripped away.

Marlene looked down at the neatly folded cheque which had been thrust into her hand. It was perfectly sweet of Isabel, of course, but one couldn't buy a great deal with just a pound or two—and it wouldn't be much more.

She unfolded the cheque and looked at it a little shamefacedly; sweet of Isabel, of course—but—she

caught her breath sharply as she saw that it was a cheque for fifty pounds.

Fifty—*pounds* ! . . . Never in her life had she possessed so much money. With careful selection it would buy everything she needed—*fifty pounds* !

Chippendale must have had a share in this generous gift she was sure, and turning quickly, she hurried to his little workshop.

He was there, intent as usual on his hobby, but he looked up as she entered, pushing his spectacles on to his forehead.

Marlene held out the cheque.

"Look !" she said briefly. "Isabel has just given it to me. Did you know ?"

The old man shook his head.

"No, my dear—she has said nothing about it to me, perhaps because she knows how little interested I am in money."

"But—it's fifty pounds !" Marlene protested. "Do you—do you think she can really afford so much ?"

He smiled a little absently.

"The answer is, that she has given it to you," he said mildly, and then, jerking his spectacles back on to his nose, "how do you like this ?" and he held up the little figure on which he had been working, the figure of Loneliness, which Marlene had seen before.

"But—it's quite different," she exclaimed, for now the man's bowed, dejected shoulders were straightened, and there was another figure clinging to his arm, and looking up at him—a girl.

Chippendale nodded.

"Yes—it is now to be called Companionship," he admitted thoughtfully, but there was a sly twinkle in his

eyes as he asked, "Does she—the smaller figure—remind you of—anyone?"

Marlene bent closer to look.

"Why, it's—a little like me," she said.

He nodded with deep satisfaction.

"That was my intention," he admitted. He held the little model at arms' length so that it was silhouetted against the sunset glow which shone through the open door. "And—the man?" he asked mildly.

There was a deep silence before Marlene said carelessly, "He doesn't remind me of anyone. Who is he meant to be?" but she knew, and had instantly recognised the resemblance to Michael Strasmore.

Chippendale laid his treasure down.

"Oh—just—anyone!" he said quietly. He rose to his feet. "So you're leaving us, my dear?"

"Yes—on Thursday—with Gladys, but only for a fortnight, and I couldn't have gone if Isabel hadn't been so wonderfully generous. I don't know how to thank her."

Chippendale brushed some specks of dust from his turned back sleeves. "Don't stay away too long. We shall miss you."

Marlene kissed him. "Thank you," she said gently, but as she walked away through the fading sunset light, she felt strangely that it was not for his last words she had thanked him, but because he had made companionship out of loneliness.

Had he—with his usual intuition, guessed how she was feeling, and was trying to help her by that little symbol? To make her believe that—some day—she would find her lost happiness?

"Not for me," she told herself with a return of the

newly won indifference. "Never for me! I will never love anyone again. . . ."

"I hear you are leaving us," Strasmore said later that evening.

He and Marlene were having supper alone, for Chippendale had asked for bread and cheese to be sent to his workshop as he was anxious to finish his new model. Chippendale was never at all particular what he ate. "Anything will do," he always declared if he was ever consulted about meals.

"So very wise!" Isabel said. "It is so true that the large majority of people dig their graves with their tummies—or is it teeth? I can *never* remember!"

She thoroughly enjoyed good meals herself, and never minded how much trouble they were to prepare.

This evening she had gone across the road for what she called "a bread and cheese gossip" with a neighbour who talked as volubly as she did herself. Marlene often wondered if either of them really listened to what the other had to say, or if it was a kind of duet which required no comment from either side. So this evening Marlene and Strasmore were alone.

Outside it was quite dark, though the windows were open and the curtains undrawn. The light from over the table shone out into the garden, as though brazenly enjoying its freedom after so many years of enforced restriction.

"Yes, but for only a fortnight," Marlene answered.

Their eyes met across the table.

"Where are you going?" Strasmore asked. She laughed at the question which just lately she seemed to hear so often.

"Only to London—with Gladys—we shall stay with her sister."

"I hope you will enjoy the change."

Marlene raised her brows. "From the tone of your voice, I am sure you hate London, don't you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have not had much cause to love it—as some people have—but I may have to go there one day next week—purely on business—and if so——" he stopped speaking and Marlene said gaily—"If you do, and I am still there, give me a ring and perhaps we can dine together—if you care to."

He smiled then. "If *you* care to!" he submitted. "But I am sure you will be fully occupied with your many friends."

"Perhaps I haven't so many—friends as you imagine! I've always lived such a quiet life—lately, anyway—but if you don't care to make an—assignment with me, we'll say no more about it," she told him flippantly.

Their eyes met again. "There is nothing I should like better," Strasmore told her quietly. "Though, I don't flatter myself that you can truthfully return the compliment."

She felt her colour rising. "What does *that* mean?" she asked exasperatedly, and he replied, "Only that—in London—you will, of course, meet so many interesting and amusing people, that by contrast I shall be dull company. But I have quite a respectable dinner jacket," he added with a smile.

She laughed then, a little guiltily, remembering Gladys' remark about his shabby clothes.

"Then I must live up to it, and buy myself a smart frock," she said—and then deliberately—"And if you care to, we might even go somewhere and dance——"

feeling quite sure he would refuse, but to her surprise he said at once—"By all means—though it is some time since I danced, and I am by no means an expert."

Not like Hugh, she thought—Hugh danced so beautifully.

She gave herself a little shake to thrust the memory aside. "Well, don't forget to ring me," she said. "I'll give you my number before I go."

"I shan't forget." Marlene pushed back her chair, "Have you finished your supper, Mr. Strasmore? and if so, may I please get down, as I was taught to ask politely when I was a little che-ild!"

There was a short silence before Strasmore said bluntly,

"And what are you still—but just a child?"

Marlene opened her eyes wide.

"Gracious! is that intended for a compliment?" she enquired; she laughed mirthlessly. "If you knew how old I sometimes feel!"

"You'll feel quite different—when you get to London."

"I hope so, devoutly!" she agreed. She looked away from him towards the open window and the darkness beyond—a darkness which was steadily illumined by one straight, golden pathway, by the light which shone above both their heads.

"I shall—miss you," Strasmore said.

Marlene laughed. "That's nice of you," she answered lightly, and she wondered what he would think had she said instead, "Strange and incredible as it seems, I believe I shall miss *you*, too!"

CHAPTER V

MARLENE eyed her reflection in the long glass with critical eyes, twisting and turning gracefully to admire her slender figure in all the bravery of its new finery. A lovely frock! and the luxurious room in Dollie Bacon's flat which she had occupied for the past fortnight, made a fitting background for its elegant beauty.

A glorious fortnight, Marlene thought, but one which had passed all too quickly in the excitement of theatres, cocktail parties, and dining out! Best of all, perhaps, were those thrilling visits to the shops where her fifty pounds—which at one time she had felt she would never be able to spend—had dwindled all too quickly.

But she had made some lovely purchases. This frock, for instance—"Gown," she supposed she ought to call it—with its trailing skirt of pale blue silk—"Pre-war, pure silk—we have *never* dealt in utility garments," so the fashionably coiffured owner of the establishment had declared).

Marlene's hair, which she had always worn in curls over her forehead, and in an attractive little roll at the back, was now also dressed in the fashionably coiffured mode, brushed up to the crown of her head in early Victorian style.

"I am not sure that it suits me," she had protested to the hairdresser of doubtful nationality, when he proudly held a hand-mirror at every possible angle for her to admire his handiwork.

"Nonsense!" Gladys declared. "You look marvellous! You'll be the belle of the ball to-night!"

Dollie was giving a dinner party at one of the smartest and most expensive restaurants, with, of course, dancing to follow until the small hours of the morning.

Dancing! . . . Marlene suddenly thought of Michael Strasmore.

During the excitement of the past two weeks she had entirely forgotten him, but now she remembered that he had promised to ring her up if he came to London, and that they would dine and dance together.

. . . "I have quite a respectable dinner-jacket!" . . .

With a strange feeling of regret, she recalled his words—and the half shy, half cynical smile which had accompanied them.

He hadn't rung her up, though it was fourteen days since she left home—so, no doubt, he was still down at Green Elms in the "God-forsaken village" as Gladys called it! Or had he—like Hugh—realised that after all, he was not interested in her?

Marlene had seen nothing of Hugh since she came to London, though she never entered a theatre or a restaurant without glancing timidly round—longing, and yet dreading, to find him there!

She frowned and picked up her lipstick, telling herself defiantly that Hugh wasn't the only man in the world; there was already at least one other, Sir David Webb, whom she had met at Dollie's, and who was paying her a good deal of attention. The expensive spray of orchids lying on the dressing-table was a gift from him, accompanied by a little note asking her to wear them that evening, for he was to be one of the party.

Marlene didn't particularly care for orchids, neither was she at all attracted to Sir David, who was short and stout, and inclined to be bald, a man with a loud laugh and an irritating habit of continually saying "Don't-cherknow!"

Still, he had a title, was a reputed millionaire, and also a great friend of Dollie's husband.

"You seem to have made a tremendous conquest of David!" Dollie told her. "So wonderful, when he has always professed to be a woman-hater." And Gladys had actually asked, "Shall you marry him, if he asks you?"

"Marry him!" Marlene stared at her, wide-eyed. "Marry *that* old man!"

"He's rich," Gladys reminded her. "And after all, money counts more than most things, and it does *last*, anyway, if you're careful with it, which is more than most things do!"

Meaning once again, of course, that love didn't last, Marlene thought cynically. If so, she was quite right. Love was just an unstable, transitory emotion that quickly wore itself out.

That was Gladys at the door now.

"Aren't you ready? May I come in? Dollie's waiting for us in the lounge, complete with cocktails."

Cocktails! . . . Marlene half sighed, remembering how difficult it was in the "God-forsaken village" to get even a bottle of stout for Chippendale, whereas here there seemed to be a never-ending supply of everything. Still, as Isabel had remarked, no doubt such an excellent business man as Dollie's husband, was able to procure anything he desired.

What it was to be both rich and influential!

"You look topping," Gladys declared admiringly. "If the old baronet doesn't come up to scratch to-night, I shall be surprised."

Marlene laughed.

"Why not find a husband for yourself, instead of worrying about one for me?"

Gladys shrugged her shoulders.

"I've had plenty of chances, more than you imagine!—but I'm not in any hurry—but when I *do* make up my mind——" She stopped, and Marlene said gaily,

"You'll choose a millionaire, I suppose, no matter how old and—boring he is!"

There was a brief silence before Gladys replied,

"I—*have* chosen him!" she laughed. "And it's someone *you* know!"

"Some—I know? I've never met a millionaire in my life—except—perhaps—your brother-in-law, and Sir David."

Gladys lit a cigarette.

"And—Michael," she said, calmly.

"*Michael!*" Marlene's colour rose as she stared at her. "Do you mean—Michael Strasmore?"

Gladys nodded. "Um! . . . I thought perhaps you'd guessed! I met him when he was in hospital, as I told you, and—oh well, I like him all right—better than any other man—but—I don't want to settle down just yet—and I told him so—and there it was! . . . He took offence and——" she laughed, before adding carelessly, "However, I shall whistle him back—some day when I'm ready!"

Whistle him *back!* . . . The confident words suddenly aroused such a feeling of anger in Marlene's heart that she was obliged to turn away.

Whistle him *back*! She knew that Gladys had always been clever where men were concerned—had often heard her light-heartedly declare that she had never yet met one whom she could not manage—but Strasmore was so very different to those who usually found her attractive—those whom Marlene herself had met.

Very young, most of them—not grave and serious as *he* was—not so steadfast—so. . . .

“Well, are you shocked?” Gladys enquired flippantly.

Marlene tried to laugh. “It takes a good deal to shock me,” she declared. She picked up her handbag. “I suppose we ought to go.”

Dollie was waiting for them in the lounge. She was much older than Gladys, and very *chic* and sophisticated.

“Help yourselves,” she invited, waving a hand towards the open cocktail cabinet. “But be quick, the car’s at the door. Oh, by the way, Marlene, Miss Wood rang up just now. She wanted to speak to you, but I told her you were dressing, so she just left a message, asking when you would be returning.” She laughed. “How she does *talk*, doesn’t she? I’m afraid I was rather curt in the end and rang off, but I really couldn’t be interested in her chit-chat. Anyway, I told her that you and Gladys are both staying on for another week.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Marlene answered, “but—I’ve been here a fortnight already, and—I think—perhaps I ought to go home.”

“Nonsense!” Dollie waved an airy hand as if to dismiss the subject. “You can’t really want to go back to that sleepy Back-of-Beyond—and I shall be

delighted if you'll stay." She looked at Marlene with a meaning smile. "And I shall not be the *only* one, I know! Get your drinks, Gladys—we must be off. I'll get my wrap——"

She left the room and Gladys said a shade enviously:

"Dollie evidently thinks the bold, bad baronet means business and, after all, you might do worse." She filled two small cocktail glasses and put one into Marlene's hand. "I can just picture you as Lady David Webb!" she chaffed her. "A house in Park Lane—a Rolls-Royce—thousands a year pocket-money——"

Marlene interrupted almost sharply:

"Money doesn't interest *me*!"

Gladys laughed. "I like *that*! when you were all up in the air with joy over a paltry fifty pounds!"

Marlene flushed sensitively.

"They were not 'paltry' to me," she declared. "And if it hadn't been for Isabel's generosity . . . we're not rich people like your family, and she must have saved and—and denied herself for months to give me so much money."

"Rubbish!" Gladys retorted briskly. "I'll bet you anything you like it was Michael's money. I know him so well! He hands it out to anyone and everyone, instead of spending it on himself. Why, when he was in hospital——"

Dollie appeared in the doorway.

"Are you girls *never* coming?" she demanded exasperatedly.

Michael's money! It was growing dusk when they drove away from the flat and, as Marlene looked out of the window, instead of the lamp-lit, busy streets, she fancied she could see Green Elms against its back-

ground of trees, and the glimmer of light from Chippendale's workshop at the bottom of the garden.

Perhaps Strasmore would be there too, with Allsorts in close attendance.

Michael's money! . . . It couldn't be true! How could it be true? Isabel would never ask or accept money from a man who was just a stranger! And even supposing such an amazing thing *had* happened, how could Gladys possibly know?—unless Michael himself had told her! But they so seldom saw one another, unless—— Strasmore certainly took Allsorts for a walk in the evenings—usually after supper—so perhaps he and Gladys had sometimes met? Even so——

Gladys touched her arm. "You're very quiet."

"Am I? I was *thinking* how strange it is to see the streets lit up again!"

She wasn't; her thoughts were far away from London and from the hectic life she imagined she had enjoyed so keenly until this evening, but now——

"I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled
Above the green elms, that a cottage was near;
And I said 'If there's peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble might hope for it here.'"

Funny she should remember every line of that verse when she had never thought of it since she first heard it spoken by Strasmore.

Peace in the world! . . . Perhaps it was because he so much preferred the "God-forsaken village" that he

had not, after all, come to London! . . . Or had he come, and not troubled to let her know?

"Here we are," Gladys said, as the car stopped and a uniformed porter hurried forward to open the door.

Dazzling lights in the smart, expensive restaurant—handsome flower decorations—dance music in the distance.

Marlene caught a glimpse of her reflection in a long mirror as she followed Dollie to the cloak-room. Could that really be she? That sophisticated figure in the flowing frock, and hair dressed in the latest fashion? A few hours ago she had felt completely satisfied with her appearance, and happily self-confident as she looked forward with eager anticipation to an evening's enjoyment, but now . . .

"There's 'Doncherknow,'" Gladys whispered, as they entered the restaurant, "complete with monocle and white carnation. Why, you've forgotten his orchids! It will break his heart—if he's got one."

Marlene mechanically raised a hand to her shoulder. "Why, so I have!"

Sir David hurried towards her and, taking her hand, raised it with awkward gallantry to his lips.

"I've a terrible confession to make," Marlene told him with forced gaiety. "Your lovely orchids—I had them all ready to wear, and then——"

"It's my fault," Gladys interrupted. "I told her we should be late, and I dragged her away, and she forgot them."

Sir David smiled broadly.

"So long as you were pleased with them, don'cher-know!" he said heartily.

"I *loved* them!" Marlene declared.

She sat next to him at the dinner table, trying her utmost to listen to his fatuous conversation and to feign interest, but her thoughts kept wandering to Green Elms, and to Isabel and Chippendale—to everyone and everything which suddenly seemed to be so much more real and important than her present surroundings.

What was wrong with her that she should suddenly have lost interest in London, and that the incessant round of gaiety and frivolity into which for the last fortnight she had plunged so whole-heartedly should all at once seem empty and—boring?

She looked round the crowded, noisy restaurant with resentful eyes.

"Quite pre-war," she heard Dollie say to the man beside her. "Really, it's wonderful how quickly we have returned to a normal mode of living!"

Normal?—*this* sort of life? Only if you have been brought up to it, and are rich and influential, Dollie should have added, for down in the "God-forsaken village" it was still sometimes difficult to know what to get for meals, and people were shabby, and Chippendale often had to go without his one luxury—a bottle of stout!

Dear Chippendale, who, for her sake she was sure, had changed his little figure of Loneliness into Companionship!

It warmed her heart to remember that he had said he would miss her!—not the only one who had said so—not the only one who, at this strange moment, she felt she would give almost anything in the world to see!

Michael Strasmore—the man who had never seemed like the stranger she supposed the world would consider him to be! She knew so little about him . . . nothing

really! and yet now—amidst all this laughing crowd—he seemed to be standing close to her, looking at her with steady, questioning eyes.

“Where are you going?” . . .

Her wandering thoughts snapped, as if they had been cut with a knife, as a man’s laugh rose above the hubbub around her.

For a moment she sat immovable, her body growing cold and stiff. Two years since she had heard that laugh! . . .

Gladys leaned across the table, her eyes wide with suppressed excitement.

“Marlene! . . . Look who’s just come in! Over there—at the next table! It’s Hugh—Hugh Clifford,” she whispered.

As if from a great way off Marlene heard her own voice answering with studied indifference:

“Really! . . . which table?” She tried to laugh. “I wonder if he will—condescend to speak to us—after the way—I’ve—behaved?”

“He’s seen us already. My dear, he’s more handsome than ever—and still in uniform! . . . Of course he’ll speak to us!”

Gladys was already smiling and nodding a greeting to the man who, with a word of apology to the elderly woman who was evidently his hostess, left her and came across to Dollie’s table.

“What a surprise!” he said. “How are you all?—and Marlene too!”

Marlene forced herself to meet his friendly gaze with smiling indifference. “How nice to see you again, Hugh.” She offered him her hand, a steady hand, but cold. He took it in a warm grasp.

"You're looking splendid," he bent down to her. "More beautiful than ever," he whispered.

"No use asking you to join our party, I suppose?" Dollie enquired.

Hugh shook his handsome head.

"No, unfortunately, though I shouldn't say that, should I?—but perhaps later on! Delighted to see you all, anyway."

He returned to his friends, and Sir David screwed his monocle firmly into his eye to stare after him.

"Good-looking chap, eh?" he said to Marlene. "Typical Army Man, don'cherknow—what's his name? Didn't catch it."

"It's Clifford—Hugh Clifford. He's been out East for—for quite a long time." There was a note of constraint in her voice which brought a flicker of suspicion into Sir David's shrewd eyes.

"Extra-special friend of yours?" he enquired.

Marlene shook her head. "Oh no! At least—I've known him for—some years."

"Champagne, madam?"

Champagne! At how many pounds a bottle, Marlene wondered, as she smiled at the wine-steward and nodded, "Please!"

The wine helped to bring her back to the present—away from Green Elms and its associations, helped her to laugh and to allow Sir David to hold her hand, and to at least pretend that she was enjoying herself, until, just as the elaborate dinner was at an end, Hugh again spoke beside her.

"May I have the honour of a dance?" he asked gaily, and taking her hand, he drew her to her feet and led her away.

"It's good to see you again," he said as his arm closed around her slender body. "How long is it since we met?"

She smiled faintly. "If you've forgotten, so have I."

"This cursed war! . . . What *isn't* it responsible for?"

"Will you—have to go back—out East?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it, but you can never tell! Let's get out of this," and before she could protest he had swept her out of the crowded room into a sort of dimly-lit loggia adjoining. "That's better—we can talk now." He led her to a cushioned settee. "You're looking very beautiful, Marlene. Tell me what you've been doing! Has anyone taken my place yet?"

She laughed. "No—not yet."

"Tell me what you've been doing."

"There's so little to tell. We're still at Green Elms, of course, Isabel, and Chippendale—and I! . . . Isabel's still up to her eyes in good works. Stuart Trounce is demobilised——"

"And still your faithful adorer?"

"So he says. Gladys isn't engaged yet—though she could have been if she'd wanted to, but——" Marlene stopped speaking at the thought of Strasmore, and again she seemed to feel as if he was near, watching her.

Hugh laughed. "Nothing more exciting to relate?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing—oh, yes! We've got a—'lodger' I suppose you would call him."

"A lodger?"

"Yes—an ex-army man. He was looking for rooms in the village and couldn't find any—every place is so

full up! So Isabel—you know what she is—always ready to do anything for a man in the services—offered to take him.” She stopped again, realising that it was far more through her influence than Isabel’s that Strasmores now occupied the room “at the top of the stairs” as Jane always insisted upon calling it.

“What sort of a chap?” Hugh enquired suspiciously.

“Oh, quite nice! Rather quiet—he’s got a dog—such a dear—”

There was a brief silence before Hugh asked in faint jealousy:

“And is—the dog’s owner—‘such a dear,’ too?”

Marlene avoided his gaze as she replied:

“I don’t know him—very well; he hasn’t been with us long—only a few weeks. Strasmores, his name is.”

“*Strasmores!*” There was blank amazement in Clifford’s voice. “Not—*Michael* Strasmores?”

She looked at him quickly.

“Yes! Why, do you know him?”

“*Know him!*” Hugh Clifford laughed. “*Know him!* I should say I do! We lunched together only yesterday, and it’s possible that he may turn up here to-night; he’s dining with some old lawyer fellow—so he said—but I shouldn’t be surprised to see him walk in at any moment.”

“He won’t come!” was the thought which instantly flashed through Marlene’s mind, and then, vehemently, “Oh, I hope he *won’t* come!”

But why? when only a short time ago she had been wishing to see him! Was it because Hugh was with her? Or because of Gladys’s suggestion that the fifty pounds with which she had purchased her new finery had come from him? Or because she was afraid of the

look of amused disapproval with which he would regard her altered style of hairdressing, and futile attempt at blasé sophistication? She raised her eyes mechanically to a clock which was visible through the open doorway. Not yet eleven! She had expected it to be much later, but as it was "the night is still young," as Gladys invariably remarked even in the small hours of the morning.

Gladys never wanted to go home when she was really enjoying herself!

"So Strasmore is at Green Elms!" Hugh said in an amused voice. "Of all the queer chaps! He never told me! I understood he was domiciled in London!"

"He may be—now," Marlene answered. "I've been in London myself for the past fortnight, so I shouldn't know!"

No, she wouldn't know, even though he had promised to ring her.

"How—funny—that you two should be friends," she said with an effort. "He will be surprised when he finds that you know me—a relation of his landlady's!" she added with a faint smile.

"But he *knows* that you and I are friends," Hugh answered quickly. "At least"—he gave a short embarrassed laugh—"I sometimes spoke to him about you—when we were out East. We were in the same division for some time—didn't I ever mention him in any of my letters?"

"No—not that I can remember." She spoke very quietly, almost with indifference, but her thoughts were running hither and thither, trying desperately to gather together the scattered incidents of the past few weeks, and to make them into something definite and complete.

Why had Michael been looking for Green Elms when she first met him? What had Hugh told him about her? Was there any truth in Gladys's suggestion that he had given money to Isabel—or that she had asked him for it?

She started violently when Hugh suddenly took her hand.

"You're looking very beautiful, Marlene," he said with deep emotion. "And now we're together again—it's—as if—the last few years never existed, and—and we're back where we were before I went away." He released her hand and slipped his arm round her waist, trying to draw her to him, but she resisted.

"Don't! . . . *please!* . . . someone will see us!"

He laughed. "Who cares? You said in one of your letters that you would give anything in the world if I could only be with you—and now I am here——"

She tried to rise, but he held her firmly.

"Marlene—can't we be as we once were to one another? Now I've seen you again, it's all come back! Though until to-night I thought—as you did—that everything was finished. Look at me, Marlene!—and believe that I still love you——"

She put both hands on his shoulders, holding him from her.

"Don't!—please! . . . I can't go back—even if you can. I *can't*, Hugh! . . . I'm sorry—but when I wrote—that I didn't care for you any longer—it was the truth——"

Yes, she knew now that it was indeed the truth, though until a moment ago, when he tried to draw her into his arms, she would fiercely have denied it.

What had happened to her that this man whom she

had once loved, and for two years had longed day and night to see again, was now little more to her than a stranger?

There were tears of humiliation in her eyes as she looked at him. He had not changed—he was still handsome—still everything she had once admired so much, but his presence left her just as cold and unresponsive as if—as if he had been Sir David Webb or any other man!

At the thought of associating Hugh—*Hugh* of all people!—with old “Dontcherknow,” as Gladys insisted upon calling him, she had to bite her lip hard to keep from hysterical laughter.

If only Hugh could know what she was thinking!

It was an infinite relief when he abruptly released her. “Very well,” he said unsteadily. “But you’ll come back to me yet! I want you, and when I want a girl——” He took her hand, drawing her to her feet. “Do you hear what they’re playing—it’s ‘I’ll see you again’—we danced to it the night before I went away—or have you forgotten that, too?” he asked bitterly.

Marlene caught her breath. “No, I haven’t forgotten——”

How *often* she had remembered that last night, and wept!

“Time may lie heavy between—
But what has been is past forgetting! . . .
Though my world has gone awry—
Though the years my tears may dry—
I shall love you till I die——”

What had happened to change her so completely, and in so short a time?

Gladys had always warned her that love didn't last—and she had refused to believe it! . . .

She suddenly caught Hugh's hand.

"Come and dance—and help me to remember!" she said in a high-pitched, trembling voice. She laughed excitedly—"And if there is anything to drink—let's drink and be merry—for to-morrow—"

She broke off with a smothered cry as Hugh caught her in his arms, and bending, kissed her lips.

"Yes, to-morrow!—we shall love one another again," he whispered passionately. . . .

"Marlene seems very gay and excited to-night," Dollie said to Gladys, in a concerned undertone. "Do you—you don't think—she's had—a little too much to drink, perhaps, do you?"

Gladys laughed and looked towards the crowded dance-floor. Marlene and Sir David had just whirled by—Sir David very hot, and flushed but smiling broadly, and Marlene looking up at him and laughing shrilly.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Gladys said carelessly. "If she has, you must blame Hugh! It must have been a bit of a shock to her to see him again."

"A—shock!" Dollie raised her carefully plucked brows. "A—*shock*! when I understand it was *she* who gave him the *congé*?"

"So she *says*!" Gladys retorted. "But I've never believed it! . . . She didn't know he was back home until I told her—and from the way she looked then—well! Still, she's danced with him half the night, so anything may happen—though old 'Dontcherknow' seems quite pleased with the way things are going, too, doesn't he?"

At the moment old Dontcherknow was saying fatuously, "I feel as if I am holding a fairy in my arms—and that I must hold her tight—in case she flies away! . . . but you wouldn't be so cruel—would you, my Lovebird?"

Marlene laughed. "I've never been taught to fly," she told him flippantly. "Why—where are we going?" she asked in sudden apprehension, as Sir David whirled her out of the crowd into the same quiet loggia where an hour ago Hugh had kissed her.

Sir David chuckled.

"'Where are we going to, my pretty maid,'" he chanted in a husky, unmusical voice—"We're going a-drinking, sir, she said, sir, she said—We're go-*ing* a-dri-*in*king——'" he cracked ignominiously on the top note and stopped, running a fat finger round the inside of his limp collar.

"You sit down and rest," he commanded, "while I find some light refreshment for us both—but not *too* light, eh?" he chuckled. "Shan't be long, Lovebird," and blowing her a clumsy kiss he blundered away, still humming the refrain of the old nursery rhyme——

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid——"

Marlene looked after him with dazed eyes.

"Where are you going?" Never before had the question seemed so poignant and personal. Where *was* she going? What was she doing?

She had allowed Hugh to make love to her—had even partially reciprocated—promising that to-morrow they would begin all over again and take up the broken thread of their love-story.

How her face burned! Her head ached too, and her heart seemed to be beating so rapidly she could hardly breathe.

She supposed she must have had too much to drink—which was why she felt so giddy and foolish! If only she could get away from the noise and heat into the cool night air! If only she could escape before that tiresome old man returned! She never wanted to see him again! Nor any of the gay, unreal crowd which she had once foolishly imagined could make for happiness. The music had stopped now, and in sudden panic she rose to her feet, and ran unsteadily towards a curtained doorway at the far end of the loggia. Perhaps it would lead her out into the fresh darkness, even if only for a few moments—perhaps. . . .

In her hurry she had forgotten the unaccustomed length of the blue frock, and as she dragged the curtain aside and stepped blindly forward, she tripped over its long folds and would have fallen had not a man's hand caught and held her.

She said, "Oh, thank you *so* much! I couldn't see where I was going——" followed by an affected little laugh of apology, which died away into bleak silence as, her eyes growing more accustomed to the dim light, she knew she was looking at Michael Strasmore.

It seemed an eternity while she stared helplessly at him, everything forgotten except that here at last was someone she was really glad to see—glad to be with! Someone who had saved her from falling, and who still held her in a firm grasp.

Strange that she should suddenly visualise Mr. Chippendale, his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead as he critically examined the little carved figure which he

had once called Loneliness—and imagine she could hear his quiet voice saying thoughtfully—“Yes—it is now to be called Companionship!” For what had he to do with London—and the breathless rush and hurry of the last interminable fortnight? *Interminable?* But wasn’t it now at an end?

She tried to smile and to find a word of welcome as she looked at Strasmore, but she felt more like tears—and it was he who spoke first.

“Like me, I am sure you are looking for some fresh air. The heat of that room is insufferable—we can get out this way——” and still holding her arm, he led her out into a quiet side street.

There was nobody about, but above the housetops the sky was clear and starlit, and the cool breeze touched Marlene’s hot cheeks like a gentle caress.

They walked a few slow steps in silence until Marlene drew a long breath of relief.

“Feeling better?” Strasmore asked quietly.

“Yes—thank you. It was so—hot and noisy.”

He made no reply, and Marlene thought vaguely—there is something I want to ask him—I know there is something, but I can’t remember what it is. Then suddenly she knew——

“You never rang me—as you promised,” she said.

“How long have you been in London?”

“Only two days. I go back to-morrow—and I *did* ring you—the night I arrived. I spoke to—Gladys Trounce, but she said you were out. I left a message, and my telephone number—in case you should care to see me.”

“She said I was—out!” Which night could that have been? To-day was Friday—then it must have

been Wednesday, and on Wednesday—on Wednesday Dollie had given a cocktail party in the flat, so how could she have been out? She *couldn't* have been!

"What time did you—ring?" she asked quietly.

"About seven, I think—I got to my hotel soon after six——"

About seven! Then she *had* been in! She was sure she had been somewhere in the flat! Yes, now she remembered—the telephone bell *had* rung as she and Gladys were crossing the hall, "all drunk and dressed-up" as Gladys had flippantly described it, which hadn't been true, of course—at least, not the "drunk" part, for the cocktail party didn't start till half past seven! She remembered that after lifting the receiver and speaking, Gladys had waved her away——

"Don't wait—it's just a call for me," she had whispered.

Why hadn't Gladys told her it was Michael, and that he had asked for her? Because—"I shall whistle him back—some day—when I am ready!" The memory of Gladys' own confident words gave her the answer.

Marlene laughed a little unsteadily——

"Kind of you to ring me! . . . I am sure Gladys *did* give me the message—but—we've been so busy—always rushing off somewhere—I suppose I forgot——"

"Yes, I suppose you forgot," Strasmore agreed calmly.

"And—you—are really going back—to-morrow?"

"Yes—to-morrow."

"Allsorts will be glad to see you. Does he fret when you are away?"

"He is with kind friends. Mr. Chippendale, particularly, is very good to him——"

"He loves all animals——"

What a silly, platitudinous conversation, Marlene thought impatiently. There were so many things of importance which she wanted to say—but she didn't know how to begin, and Michael was no help to her. He wasn't even holding her arm now! Funny how lonely the knowledge made her feel.

"So you go back to Green Elms to-morrow," she said again.

"Yes," he agreed. She knew he was smiling as he looked down at her—that wry, critical smile which was so difficult to understand. "That is the second time you have asked me that question," he said.

"Is it?" She laughed. "Perhaps because people say to-morrow never comes," she answered flippantly.

"It will—for me," he replied. "I have had enough of London and shall be glad to get back to the country."

"I love London!" Marlene said defiantly, and at once longed to take back the words and to say, "No, I don't—I hate it—I want to come back with you——" Only, of course, if she said it, he wouldn't believe her.

"Then you will be staying on—for some time?" he asked.

"I don't know—they want me to—Dollie and——" she suddenly remembered something else she must say to this man. "You never told me you knew Hugh Clifford!" she challenged him.

"No—there seemed to be no point in mentioning it. We were never—particularly friendly."

"But he told me—Hugh said—you lunched with him yesterday!"

"That is quite true."

"And that he—expected you here—to-night?"

"Yes."

"But—if you are not friends—why did you come?"

Strasmore threw his half-smoked cigarette away into the darkness.

"Do you wish me to answer that question?"

Marlene frowned as she looked up at him, but it was too dark to see his face—just his tall figure and the broad outline of his shoulders.

"Why—of course," she said impatiently. "Unless there is some profound mystery attached to it?"

It was a moment before Strasmore answered—

"I came because I wanted to see *you*."

"To see—*me*? But—how did you know I should be here? Even Hugh didn't know—"

"I saw your car stop at the door—I was passing on my way to the Club—I saw you get out of the car, but although Clifford had asked me to join his party, or rather, his hostess had asked me—I forget her name—I had no intention of coming until—I knew you would be here."

There was a brief silence before Marlene asked—

"Am I to take that as a compliment? It sounds rather as if it is meant to be one." She tried to speak with light indifference, but her heart was beating so rapidly, it was difficult to steady her voice.

"I don't quite know how to answer that question," Strasmore said quietly. "I can only repeat that I wanted to see you. To see whether here—in London—amid such very different surroundings—you were still the same girl who so strangely attracted me—even before we met!"

"*Before*—we met?" She spoke in breathless bewilderment. "I don't understand! *Before* we met?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes," Strasmore answered. "You see—Clifford had spoken of you—I had seen your photograph."

Marlene laughed derisively.

"You're not by any chance, mixing me up with the 'Pin-Up Girl' you once told me about, are you?" she submitted sarcastically. "Because, if so——"

"The 'Pin-Up Girl,' as you call her——" Strasmore interrupted, "Was—yourself, Marlene!"

CHAPTER VI

IT seemed strange to Marlene, and yet also quite natural, that in the midst of her amazed confusion, her first thought should be, "I wish I could see your face! I should know then what you really mean!"

Not that she doubted Strasmore's sincerity; she knew he was not the type of man to say a thing he did not really mean; not the man to pay an empty compliment, or to indulge in fulsome flattery as—as Sir David would, for instance—or even—Hugh!

It was only that she knew so little about him, or was that incorrect, and did she really know all that mattered?

She suddenly seemed to hear Isabel's voice saying with airy confidence, "I am a firm believer in first impressions! I always know at *once* whether I shall like people and be able to trust them, or whether it will be quite impossible for us *ever* to be friends!"

Not that Isabel was infallible. She so frequently altered her opinion of new acquaintances, entirely forgetting her original good impression, but Marlene remembered her own feeling of strange kinship when she first saw Michael Strasmore walking slowly along the village street, and her queer conviction that somewhere in a forgotten past, they must have met, and have been friends!

It wasn't so, of course, she had been quite wrong, as Isabel so often was, but standing there in the cool darkness, the feeling again took possession of her, flooding her whole being like something warm and comforting.

"I *wish* I could see your face!" she thought again, with painful longing. It seemed like a direct answer to that wish, when the light from the headlamps of a car coming slowly down the narrow street, suddenly shone upon Strasmore with flashing brilliance, before it passed on and was gone.

But Marlene could learn nothing from the expression of his eyes which were bent upon her, and she sighed, before she asked light-heartedly.

"And now, of course, you are completely disillusioned! Is that what you mean—that you hate the fashionable way I have dressed my hair, and that you disapprove because I have danced so much with Sir David——?"

"And with Clifford," Strasmore said shortly.

"With—Hugh!" Marlene passed a hand across her eyes, as if to brush away something which impeded her sight.

What had Sir David or Hugh to do with this moment of self-revelation? Why had she mentioned either of

their names? Perhaps because she was still unsure of herself—like someone standing at a crossroad, uncertain which way to turn.

As if she were a dual personality! . . . the Marlene^{*} who longed to put her hand into Strasmore's and to say with deep sincerity, "Hold my hand, and never let it go. With you I can find happiness of which I have never dreamed, and which will last to the end of my life!"

And the other—the modern, sophisticated Marlene, with a smartly coiffured head which still throbbed with the unaccustomed wine she had been foolish enough to drink, who had defiantly resolved never to care for anyone again, who had not been able to give the slightest real response even when she had submitted to Hugh Clifford's passionate kisses, and had promised him that to-morrow they would begin their dead love-story all over again. The Marlene who had been genuinely flattered by the admiration of a man old enough to be her father, and foolish enough to imagine that only money and false gaiety and expensive clothes can make for real happiness.

Which part of her was the real Marlene? Did she really wish that Michael would take her hand and hold it against the world and her own doubts and disillusionment? Had they enough in common to find lasting happiness together, even supposing it was what he wished? He was so quiet, so different to other men she had known. He loved the country and the simple things of life of which she believed she had grown so weary.

How could he care for her if he had once cared for Gladys?

"I shall whistle him back—some day—when I'm ready."

It was like a rough hand shaking her, as she recalled the calm confidence with which Gladys had spoken those words.

Perhaps, after all, Strasmore was as inconstant as Hugh had been—as all men were! . . . She would be a fool to risk disillusionment a second time—even though . . . Unconsciously she clasped her hands tightly together to keep them from moving towards him—she had vowed never to care for anyone again, and she would keep that vow. . . .

Marlene gave herself a little defiant shake.

"And why shouldn't I dance with Hugh?" she asked calmly. "I have known him for some years, much longer than I have known *you*!" But somehow, even those words sounded false, as again she was conscious of the conviction that somewhere in the past she and this man had been—friends—if nothing deeper. So strong a conviction that she rushed on in quick defiance: "You said just now that Hugh had shown you my photograph! . . . I only hope it was a good one?"

"Good enough for me to recognise you when we met," Strasmore answered.

She laughed. "That was clever of you! . . . but if to-night has completely disillusioned you——"

He interrupted her flippant submission with sudden harshness. "You told me your engagement to Clifford was at an end."

There was a brief silence before she replied; once again she felt as if the girl she knew she *could* be with this man's love to help her and the girl who a few moments

ago had stumbled blindly away from the heat and noise of the dance-room were struggling together for the mastery.

She wanted to say with passionate sincerity :

"It *is* all over and done with ! Nothing matters any more if only you will take my hand and hold it." But instead, as if from a great distance, she heard her own voice saying flippantly :

"My engagement *is* at an end, as you are kind enough to be so interested ! . . . I always knew—that—love—wouldn't last ! Why should it ?—nothing else does ! . . . And I'm glad to be free to——" Her voice wavered, before with an effort she could control it to ask defiantly, "But what have my affairs to do with you, I should like to know ?"

Strasmore laughed grimly. "Only that I imagined I ought to congratulate you on a happy reunion, as this evening I had the—misfortune—or was it good luck ?—to see you in Clifford's arms."

So he had seen that—meaningless embrace !

It seemed an eternity before, once again—as if from very far away—she heard her own voice saying in flippant amusement :

"How very touching ! . . . when we thought we were quite alone ! I must tell Hugh to be more careful in future. And now, if you have no objection, Mr. Strasmore, I think I will go back to my friends—it must be getting late."

She knew that he followed her as she turned and walked away—knew that it was his hand that opened the door for her to re-enter the noisy restaurant, and then, as it closed behind her, she found herself alone.

For a moment she stood in the dimly-lit, deserted

loggia, feeling utterly lost, before, with a defiant shrug of her shoulders, she rejoined Dollie's noisy party.

"So here you are!" Gladys greeted her. "We thought you must have eloped! Where *have* you been?" She lowered her voice to say with a little giggle, "Sir David has been tearing his hair in despair—the little bit he has left! And Dollie thinks it's time we pulled ourselves together and went home."

"Went—home? Why, what time is it?" Marlene asked vaguely.

"It's past two," Dollie said rather coldly. "So get your wraps, both of you. Sir David has gone already," she added with a note of reproach.

"Where *have* you been all this time?" Gladys asked again, as she and Marlene hurried away. "Old Dontcherknow wanted to call in the police! . . . I'm afraid you've spoilt your chances with *him*! . . . Where *have* you been?"

"It was so hot, and my head ached. I went out to get some fresh air."

"*Alone?*"

"Yes—alone! . . . Why?"

Gladys shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I thought perhaps you were with Hugh—he seems to have disappeared too."

"No, I wasn't with Hugh."

Gladys took her wrap from the cloak-room attendant and draped it carelessly round her shoulders.

"Hugh came to say good night to us," she said, "and wanted to know where you were." She leaned towards the mirror and dabbed her nose with a powder-puff. "By the way, he said they had expected your

P.G. to turn up, but that he hasn't put in an appearance!"

"My—P.G.?"

Gladys frowned. "Michael Strasmore, I mean, of course!" Gladys looked at Marlene very directly. "Did *you* know he was expected?" she asked.

Marlene shook her head.

"How should I know?" but she suddenly remembered the 'phone message she had never received, and her face hardened as she turned away. What difference would it have made to—everything?—had she known that Michael was in London and had wished to see her?

"I could have told Hugh that Michael wouldn't come," Gladys said more cheerfully as the two girls went out to the waiting car. "He hates these sort of 'do's.' I shall have to convert him——"

"I should think that will be easy," Marlene said with faint sarcasm, but Gladys only laughed.

"Yes," she agreed. "I generally manage to get what I want in the long run."

"Nice to know what you *do* want," Marlene submitted dryly. It was so much more than she herself knew! As the car moved away she looked out of the window into the lighted street. Where was Michael now and what was he thinking? Despising her perhaps—not understanding that it was an uncontrollable feeling of self-defence which had made her say exactly the opposite to the words clamouring at her heart.

And to-morrow he was going back to Green Elms, and to the "room at the top of the stairs"! How delighted Allsorts would be to see him, and how absurd that she should feel faintly jealous of the big, shaggy dog who had once, with such keen insight, guessed that

she was in trouble, and had offered her his silent sympathy!

"You girls are very quiet!" Dollie remarked a trifle offensively. "Haven't you enjoyed your evening?"

Marlene roused herself with an effort.

"I have, tremendously! But I feel rather—sleepy."

"That's the wine," Gladys told her promptly. "Anyway, you ought to sleep well," She yawned and, leaning back, closed her eyes, but in spite of her sleepy admission, Marlene had never felt so wide awake in her life, and more than once, catching a glimpse of a man's tall figure in the flare of the car's headlights, she leaned forward with strained attention, wondering if it could be Strasmore!

"Have you girls made up your minds whether you intend to stay on?" Dollie enquired presently. "I think *you* ought to, Marlene—Sir David is giving a dinner-party next week, you know, and he'll never forgive you if you don't go—especially after the way you turned him down to-night," she added reproachfully. Sir David was Dollie's idea of the completely influential notoriety, and she found it difficult to forgive Marlene for having deserted him without explanation.

"I should love to stay—if I may," Gladys said, and Marlene agreed.

"So should I—if they don't want me at home."

But when they reached the flat it was to find that Mr. Chippendale had rung up with the announcement that Isabel had had another fall and could Marlene possibly come home?

"I must go, of course," Marlene said at once. "Jane can't manage alone. I'm so sorry," she apologised as she met Dollie's protesting eyes.

"If you were dead they would have to manage," she said unsympathetically.

"But I'm not dead!" Marlene submitted smilingly, though when she was alone in her room she sat down on the side of the bed and almost wished that she could fall asleep and not wake up again.

Life was so disappointing; nothing went as you hoped it would—she thought of Hugh Clifford. She had promised to lunch with him to-morrow—or was it to-morrow already? Not that she felt any regret because it would be impossible to keep the appointment, although only a short time ago it would have cut her to the heart. Perhaps after all, women were just as fickle as men, because to-night when he had kissed her so passionately, instead of eagerly responding, she had wanted to turn her face away almost as if—as if she knew, as she did now, that Michael Strasmore had seen that kiss!

Would he be at Green Elms when she arrived? She wished with all her heart that he had kept away this evening, for now instead of that strange feeling of peace and kinship which had existed between them, she knew there could only be enmity and—on her part at least—defensive defiance!

If only she had been quite honest with him about that 'phone call—but how could she have betrayed Gladys? If only he had been quite honest with *her*, and had told her why he had been looking for Green Elms that morning they first met, and if—perhaps it had been because he wished to meet her?

And now, having seen her in Hugh Clifford's embrace, perhaps he would never tell her!

"Who cares, anyway?" Marlene thought defiantly, as she undressed, slipping out of the long blue frock of which she had been so proud, leaving it lying in a forlorn heap on the floor.

Had it really been paid for by Michael's money? If so, that was a fresh cause of resentment; but somehow she could not believe that Isabel would take money from a man who was just a stranger—to Isabel, at least!

She turned out the light and crept into bed, conscious once more of her weariness and aching head. But sleep refused to come. It was already getting light outside—she could see the first faint glimmer of dawn through a chink in the curtains.

"Where are you going to, my pretty maid!"

Poor old Sir David! She was sorry if she had offended him, and that, oddly enough, was Marlene's last conscious thought before she fell asleep. . . .

When she woke it was to find Clementine, Dollie's smart personal maid, standing beside her, apologetically shaking her arm.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Miss Beech—I am sorry to wake you, but it's the same gentleman who rang up last night when you were out, and he seems very anxious to speak to you."

Chippendale! . . . Marlene was out of bed in an instant and into her dressing-gown. The blue frock still lay in a forlorn heap on the floor, and she frowned as she saw Clementine pick it up almost reverently and carry it over to the wardrobe. As if frocks really mattered—even if they cost the earth, she thought impatiently, as she hurried to the telephone.

Nice to hear Chippendale's quiet voice again.

"Is that you, my dear?"

"Yes, I got your message too late last night to 'phone, but I am coming home this morning. How is Isabel?"

"Not too well—she will be glad to see you."

"And are you all right? And Jane?"

"Quite all right!"

"And—Allsorts?" Marlene smiled faintly as she asked the question.

"He is here—beside me—at this moment," Chippendale told her. "We will expect you—about lunch-time?"

"Yes." It was on the top of her tongue to ask, "And is Mr. Strasmore coming back to-day?" but Chippendale had already rung off.

"I don't suppose Miss Wood is seriously ill," Gladys said indifferently, as she sat on the edge of Marlene's bed, watching while Clementine packed her clothes for her. "She always makes rather a fuss about things, doesn't she?"

It was certainly the truth, but Marlene felt resentful as she answered that Chippendale would not have sent for her unless it had been really necessary.

"I may come back myself soon," Gladys said presently. "I'd ring Michael and ask how long he will be staying in London, if I knew where to find him," she added a little guiltily.

As if she *didn't* know, Marlene thought!

She left without saying good-bye to Dollie, who invariably slept until midday after a late night, and would never be disturbed no matter for what cause.

Was Isabel perhaps seriously ill, Marlene wondered anxiously, and she remembered how Isabel had said

gaily, after the fall from the ladder when she broke her hip :

" Well, that's my second serious mishap ! First pneumonia, now this ! . . . I wonder what the third thing will be ? Things always happen in *threes* ! . . . and though people say the third time is lucky, I think myself it's generally *unlucky* ! " and she had meandered on for some time, trying to explain why, and only succeeding in contradicting every reason she originally gave for the belief.

Poor Isabel ! . . . dear Isabel—with her tiresome personality and heart of gold.

There was a queue at the booking office when Marlene reached the station, and only five minutes before the train was due to leave. How slow people were, she thought impatiently !—wasting time asking unimportant questions, and counting their change ; but she got her ticket at last and was hurrying towards the departure platform, struggling with her heavy suit-case, for she had been unable to find a porter, when someone spoke behind her :

" Let me carry that for you, if I may."

It was Michael Strasmore. She flushed as she looked up at him. " Oh, thank you. Isabel is ill, and Chippendale rang up for me, so I am going home."

He smiled then—a little absently.

" So, for once—surprisingly—we are both going the same way," he said quietly.

CHAPTER VII

THE train was late in starting, and having secured seats and put Marlene's suitcase on the rack Strasmore left the compartment and stood outside on the crowded platform, smoking a cigarette.

Marlene opened a magazine which she had brought with her, but although she turned the pages with pretended interest, her thoughts were all with the man in whose company she must spend the next few hours. Was she glad or sorry? Last night they had parted on unfriendly terms, but this morning last night seemed very far away and she realised with mixed feelings of gladness and annoyance that the strange feeling of kinship between them had refused to be defeated, and was again rising paramount. What had he meant by saying that for once they were both surprisingly going the same way? They had certainly been at cross purposes, or was that just pretence? She raised her eyes a little furtively to look at him. He was more smartly dressed than she had ever seen him—except last night, when, of course, he had worn the “quite respectable dinner jacket.” She liked his dark blue serge suit, and the tie to match—liked the angle at which he wore his soft felt hat—even the way he held the cigarette between his lips—his head a little on one side to avoid the smoke.

He was not looking towards her—perhaps he had already forgotten she would be his travelling companion until they reached Green Elms! His “travelling companion!” She liked the sound of that also! And yet—once, not so very long ago, her idea of complete

happiness had been to travel somewhere—anywhere—with Hugh Clifford!

America, Paris, Egypt! The mere thought of seeing the world in his company had thrilled her to the soul, but now—she was amused, and a little ashamed because it left her quite unmoved! But to-day—had it been with Strasmore——

“One man pins me to the wall, while with another I walk among the stars.”

Mr. Chippendale had once quoted those words to her, though for what reason she had forgotten! A strange man, Chippendale! So simple and unexact, and yet sometimes showing such a flash of poetical insight that she could only gaze at him in wonderment.

Marlene moved restlessly and threw the magazine aside.

She wished the train would start—she wished Michael Strasmore would come back and talk to her! With a sudden impulse, she had leaned forward to attract his attention, when a voice suddenly rose above the clamour, and the smart figure of Hugh Clifford came into view.

“Hullo, Strasmore! . . . Didn’t know you’d be on this train! I suppose you haven’t seen Miss Beech anywhere, have you?”

Marlene drew quickly back from the window, but he had already seen her, and was at the carriage door.

“Darling! . . . I was afraid I should be too late! I rang up the flat this morning to know what had happened to you last night, and they told me you were on your way home, so I rushed off in the hope of seeing you. Rotten luck! I’d come down with you, only I can’t get away for a day or two, but I’ll ring you to-night

—and——” He seemed to remember Strasmore’s presence for he glanced over his shoulder with a slight frown. “Are you two travelling together?” he asked rather shortly.

Strasmore shook his head. “No, I’m going third, so I’ll say good-bye——” and then as the guard’s shrill whistle sounded, he looked at Marlene—(“At last!” she thought irately)—“See you when we arrive,” he said, and raising his hat, he moved quickly away.

Marlene was a little flushed, but she managed a faint smile as Clifford took her hand.

“Thank you for coming, Isabel’s ill, but, of course, they told you. Be careful!—we’re moving——”

Hugh hurriedly raised his hand to her lips before he stepped hurriedly back, banging up the door.

“Good-bye, darling—I’ll ring you to-night——”

“Good-bye.” She did not rise from her seat to wave to him, and yet when they last parted, she had run along beside the swiftly moving train which carried him away, her tear-filled eyes straining for a last glimpse of him. Only two years ago! But two years could be a life-time. Long enough for a love which she had fondly believed to be everlasting, to die, and to leave in its place nothing but blank incredulity.

Marlene took off her hat and passed a trembling hand across her eyes. Her head ached still a little, but her chief thought was that Strasmore had told a deliberate untruth rather than admit that he had intended travelling with her. “No—I’m going third!”

She knew it was not correct, for she had seen his ticket as they passed the barrier together, and besides—there was his suit-case on the seat opposite to her. She

looked at it with resentful eyes—the same shabby suit-case he had been carrying the day they first met when she had stopped and asked where he was going!

With a childish feeling of anger and resentment she hoped passionately he would forget all about it, and lose it with all its contents, whatever they might be! The respectable dinner-jacket amongst them, no doubt!

There were only two other people in the compartment—a naval officer and a girl, but they were too engrossed in one another to pay any attention to her. Lovers perhaps—or husband and wife! At any rate, they were unashamedly holding hands. A sudden wave of loneliness swept through Marlene's heart.

Travelling companions! . . . Not only to the end of this journey, but perhaps to the end of their lives!

She wished she had someone to hold her hand—just as last night that strange new Marlene had longed to say to Strasmore with deep sincerity, "Hold my hand, and never let it go!"

Foolish to believe that had she spoken those words they would have been what he wanted to hear her say! How could he possibly care if he was willing to snatch at any pretence in order to avoid travelling only a few short miles with her!

Unkind—and not very courteous either! Hugh would never have done such a thing—not that she would mind if he did—not now, anyway! Well, she didn't care if Strasmore chose to behave so ungallantly; there wasn't a man in the whole world who was worth a single tear or a foolish heartache.

With a gesture of defiance she again picked up the magazine and opened it, only to find herself looking down at an illustration of two young people—a girl and a soldier—locked in a close embrace.

Always the same silly sentiment, she thought impatiently. There would be precious little romance in the world if every girl was called upon to face her own experience. One of Gladys Trounce's favourite assertions was, that although every lover was different, all husbands came out of the same box ! Not an original declaration, of course, even though Gladys knew so much about men ! Enough, according to herself, to be able to whistle at least *one* of them back to this allegiance when it suited her !

Marlene tossed the magazine aside again, and stared out of the window with eyes that could only see a man's tall figure in a dark blue suit—walking away from her !

Perhaps that was what he would do again when they reached their destination—walk calmly away, without even waiting to see whether old Phipps, the porter, was there to carry her suit-case.

The train ran into a dingy suburban station, and as it stopped, the girl and the naval officer rose—still holding hands.

" Home, darling ! " Marlene heard the girl say softly, and then in a whisper, " Together—this time ! "

Marlene bit her lip. Together ! Yes, but for how long, she asked herself cynically. She felt more lonely than ever as the train again sped on its way, until at last, with a feeling of angry defiance, she rose, and pulled back the sliding door which led into the corridor.

Strasmore was probably quite close by; he wouldn't have had time to get very far away before the train left the London terminus. She could make a plausible excuse about the shabby suit-case—telling him she was afraid he might have forgotten it! *Afraid?* When a moment ago she had been hoping it was what he *would* do!

Well, anyway—quarrelling with him was preferable to being left with only her troubled thoughts for company, and she. . . . Marlene stopped sharply to avoid bumping into Strasmore's tall figure which filled the entire narrow passage-way as he came towards her.

"I forgot my suit-case," he said.

"Yes." She tried to look at him coldly, but in spite of herself, she smiled. "I was just coming to tell you you had left it with me."

"Kind of you." Strasmore stood aside to let her enter the compartment. "All alone?" he submitted, as he picked up the shabby suit-case.

"Yes—even though you never *had* a third-class ticket," she said defiantly.

He laughed. "I acted with the very best of intentions, I assure you, having heard the time-worn saying that two is company and three none! . . . However, if you would like me to stay——"

"Please yourself, entirely."

"Then I will stay," Strasmore said calmly, and replacing the suit-case, he seated himself at the opposite end of the carriage.

As far away from me as possible, of course, Marlene thought impatiently. Not that she cared!

"Will you have a cigarette?" Strasmore asked politely.

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I have my own—and I don't care for the kind you always smoke."

"Really!" There was a satirical note in his quiet voice. "And yet they are exactly the same brand as your own, and always have been! Cigarettes evidently being one of the few tastes we have in common."

Marlene flushed. "Perhaps the only one!" she said sharply.

"Possibly," he agreed. "At the moment, anyway."

She looked at him resentfully.

"Why—at the moment? What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you chose to admit it—which you will not—we could find a great deal in common—almost everything, in fact."

She tried to laugh. "This all sounds very mysterious!"

"To you, no doubt," he agreed. "But to me it is the most simple thing in the world, and some day, when—if ever!—you will be entirely natural and—honest with yourself—you too——"

Marlene interrupted with trembling anger. "Are you trying to insult me, Mr. Strasmore?"

"Perhaps—if the truth is an insult," he agreed with a faint smile.

Marlene started up, her cheeks crimson.

"How *dare* you speak to me like this? I will not stay with you," she flung at him, furiously, and with impotent hands she tried to drag open the half-closed door.

"Don't forget your hat," Strasmore said calmly. He rose to his feet, picking it up and handing it to her. Marlene snatched it from him, and then to her profound shame and distress, she suddenly burst

into tears, collapsing forlornly into the corner seat opposite him.

"I hate you—I wish I'd n-never s-seen you," she sobbed, as a child might have done. "I—*hate* you."

There was a short silence before Strasmore bent down and touched her hand.

"Perhaps—some day—you will—love me—just a little—instead," he said with surprising emotion, and then—as the train began to slow down. "Now—stop crying—or people may think I have been ill-treating you—and we are nearly home."

He turned away from her, and taking her suit-case from the rack, placed it beside his own, while Marlene did her best to suppress her sobbing and to check her tears.

"All right?" he asked presently.

She nodded. "Yes—I don't know—why I was such a *fool*," she said unsteadily. She groped in her handbag for a powder-puff.

"We all are—at some time in our lives," he answered.

The train stopped and he opened the door, turning to offer her his hand which she ignored.

"I can manage, thank you." But she was wondering in helpless confusion what he would think—had she put her hand into his and had said, as last night she had longed to say, "Yes, hold my hand, and never let it go!"

Perhaps he would just—laugh!

There was no Phipps to be seen on the platform, so Strasmore picked up both suit-cases.

"It's all right—I've ordered a taxi," he said; he looked down at her. "Not for my own exclusive use!

But Mr. Chippendale rang me early this morning to say he was expecting you—probably by this train.”

“*Chippendale* did?”

“Yes, he has rung me twice in the past two days.”

“Oh!” She felt annoyed about that—for why on earth should Chippendale—who hated ‘phoning anyone, and never did so if it could be avoided—trouble to ring this man who was almost a stranger to him?

“*Why* did he ring you?” she asked resentfully.

“I’ve just told you,” Strasmore answered. “He also mentioned that Allsorts is quite happy, though he insists upon sleeping outside my bedroom door.”

She looked up at him apprehensively.

“He didn’t say—Isabel isn’t any worse, is she?”

“No—nothing like that.”

Marlene drew a quick sigh of relief—though she said a little coldly, “Chippendale hates the telephone—so I can’t understand why he bothered to ring you at all.”

Strasmore’s firm lips twisted into a faint smile: “Perhaps because he doesn’t—dislike me—as heartily as you do,” he replied. “There’s our taxi.”

It was a silent drive home, and this time it was Marlene who sat as far away from Strasmore as the limited space would allow, refusing to look at him.

“Perhaps some day—you will love me—just a little—instead!”

The words so quietly spoken, echoed persistently through her mind.

A prophecy? Or a warning? She had vowed never to love anyone again—loving anyone only brought unhappiness and disillusionment. Far better to be heart whole and entirely free! To have a good time—to be able to laugh at life instead of to weep.

Strasmore spoke suddenly with an unconscious note of gladness in his voice.

"Well—here we are—at home, sweet home!"

"Because we live there," Marlene said curtly, and then frowned, realising that once again she was merely quoting one of Gladys' favourite "hard-boiled" sayings.

It was Isabel who always called them "hard-boiled"—hastening to add that she knew Gladdie wasn't *really* so cynical and sophisticated as she liked to pretend—though at the same time she was *sometimes*, of course, very *heartless* and unsympathetic! "Such a pity, when we all have so *much* to bear!—not that Gladdie has had a great deal, so far! But then, you never know!"

Marlene smiled faintly as she thought of Isabel and her unflinching self-contradiction. Dear Isabel! . . . she hoped she would soon be quite well.

There was a riotous welcome awaiting them as the taxi stopped, at the gate of Green Elms. A ferocious barking as Allsorts came bounding down the garden path and literally flung himself at his master's chest—Jane, in a stiffly starched cap and apron, smiling and waving as excitedly from the doorway, as if she were greeting repatriated prisoners, Marlene thought comically. Even Mr. Chippendale was there, his spectacles pushed up on to his forehead, and one of his engraving implements protruding from a breast pocket.

Marlene kissed them both, and brushed some specks of dust from the lapel of Chippendale's coat.

"Glad to see us?" she asked, and then frowned—because of course she hadn't intended to say "us."

Travelling companions! . . . She thought suddenly of the girl and the naval officer who had shared her compartment. They would be at their own home now,

wherever that was—and “together”—as the girl had whispered.

Marlene gave herself a little shake.

“And how is Isabel?” she asked.

“Propped up,” Jane told her. “Propped up in bed, and just longing to see you both.”

Marlene nearly ejaculated “*Both!*” in profound disapproval, but she checked the word in time.

“I’ll go straight up to her,” she said instead.

Isabel was certainly “propped up” all right, with at least half a dozen pillows behind her back, and a red shawl (crocheted by Jane) which she only wore on very special occasions, draped artistically round her shoulders.

She held out both arms to Marlene and hugged her.

“So you’re really home at last! We’ve missed you so much, though Jane has been wonderful and the time has simply *flown*, though it seems months instead of weeks since you went away! Mind my leg—not that it really hurts at all, but I have to be careful because it’s very painful sometimes.” She held the girl a little from her. “Let me look at you! . . . you’re not looking as well as I expected you would. I expect you’re tired out with the journey, that’s what it is, though Chippendale said it would only take about two hours! . . . It’s so long since I went to London I’ve quite forgotten all about trains and things! . . . And a new coat! . . . It fits you to perfection, Marlene—blue is just your colour, though I always think *fawn* suits you better.”

“And how did you manage to fall *this* time,” Marlene asked when she could get a word in edgeways.

Isabel proceeded to explain.

"It wasn't exactly a fall! I just tripped over some thing in the garden. It was getting dark, and I was in a hurry to get indoors. You see, I'd been out all day helping Mrs. Trounce with one of her children's parties—no, not quite *all* day, because I didn't go until three o'clock, but——"

Marlene gently interrupted.

"And then you fell?"

Isabel nodded gaily. "Yes, I *fell*! . . . And of course on my bad hip! . . . It wasn't very painful—not until I tried to get up, and then—well, then I couldn't! . . . I called for Chippendale, and luckily he heard, but he's not very strong, as you know, and he had to fetch Jane to help him carry me in—and then—" She sighed. "They did their best, of course, but they are not very *skilful* at handling injured people, and I don't mind admitting that I wished Michael had been there—it would all have been so much less *complicated*! Such a strong man, isn't he? At least, he *looks* as if he is! . . . And—well, here I am! And I'm told here I shall have to stay for at *least* another fortnight! So tiresome, when there is so much to do now we are at *peace*! However"—she patted Marlene's cheek affectionately—"I feel *much* better now you are home again! . . . and of course Michael travelled with you, didn't he?"

"Well—yes."

Isabel nodded brightly.

"I was sure he would. I said to Chippendale, Marlene will be quite safe with Michael—he'll look after her! Such an ideal travelling companion—in *every* way!"

Except that, when it suits him, he says he travels

third, Marlene thought cynically, and can be—horribly rude—when he likes!

"Perhaps some day—you will care for me as much as I care for you!" . . .

"Run and take your hat off," Isabel ordered. "Lunch must be nearly ready. Is that Jane calling? Yes, it is! Now what does *she* want, I wonder! Everything is ordered and arranged—I have seen to everything myself—in spite of having to keep to my bed!—but you know what Jane is! . . . so forgetful sometimes, though as a rule her memory is simply splendid." Isabel stopped speaking and raised a warning finger to her lip as Jane's voice sounded on the landing.

"Miss Marlene—are you there, Miss Marlene? There's a telegram for you, and the boy's waiting."

"For me?" Marlene hurried to the door and, taking the envelope from Jane's hand, tore it open.

There was a brief silence, then she laughed.

"Oh, it's all right—there's no answer." And, as Jane reluctantly departed, she returned to Isabel's bedside.

"Not *bad* news?" Isabel asked anxiously. "Telegrams generally bring *bad* news, though now we are at peace I suppose most of them bring *good* news, don't they?"

"It's—just from a man I met at Dollie's," Marlene explained. "It says 'Sorry to hear of your trouble, and that you have had to return home. Shall hope to call upon you before long—deepest sympathy, David.'"

"*David*!" Isabel said dubiously. "Who is David? I don't remember anyone called David."

Marlene laughed. "It's Sir David Webb—he's quite

old—but—he's been very—nice to me——" she admitted lamely.

Kind ! . . . poor old Dontcherknow—whom she had already quite forgotten ! Kind of him to have sent that wire, and yet—she resented it too, just as she might have resented a rough hand gripping her shoulder and waking her from a pleasant sleep.

She almost felt as if some unwanted stranger had walked into Green Elms, confident of a welcome, spoiling her happy return to "home sweet home," as Michael had called it.

"Because we live there," as Gladys would have sagely remarked.

Marlene sighed as she left Isabel's room, pausing for a moment to glance over the balusters down to the hall below. Strasmore was there, and Allsorts. And Michael's hand was fondly caressing the big dog's shaggy head.

Michael's hand which, when he had offered it to her, she had refused to take !

CHAPTER VIII

IT may have been that Isabel was more ill than anyone suspected, or that the state of excitement into which she had worked herself over Marlene's return proved too much, for at any rate on the following morning she was certainly weaker.

It was Jane who first recognised the change in her, and she hurriedly crossed the landing to Marlene's room, rapping sharply on her door.

"Come in!" Marlene was only half awake after a restless night, but Jane unsympathetically jerked back the curtains, letting in the bright sunshine as she announced bluntly that she didn't like the look of Miss Isabel.

Marlene started up. "What do you mean?"

"What I say," Jane retorted. "She opened her eyes when I took her tea in, but she hadn't a word to say, which isn't like *her*, as you know. In my opinion we ought to send for the doctor, for what good he is," she added grimly. Jane didn't like doctors.

"I'll come and see her," Marlene said quickly, and she sprang out of bed and slipped on her dressing-gown.

Isabel was lying on her back, her eyes closed, and her morning tea (which she always declared she enjoyed more than any meal in the day) left untouched on the little table beside her, but she looked up as the girl entered and smiled faintly.

"Good morning," she said with an effort at her old cheeriness. "I hope you slept well after your long journey?"

"Very well, thank you, dear," Marlene said untruthfully. She touched the thin, capable hand lying outside the coverlet. "How do you feel?" she asked.

Isabel's eyes closed again and she sighed.

"A little tired, to tell the truth," she admitted. "Which, of course, is absurd, seeing how long I have been in bed, and therefore I ought to feel thoroughly rested, though I always feel *much* less tired when I am up and doing. However——" her voice trailed drowsily away.

"You haven't had your tea," Marlene said gently. "I'll pour it out for you."

"Thank you, dear." But though she took a little sip from the cup which Marlene held to her lips, she at once turned her head away again. "That was very refreshing," she said vaguely. "And now just draw the curtains again and leave me. I'll have a little doze."

Marlene beckoned Jane from the room.

"Is Mr. Strasmore up?" she asked. "Because, if so, ask him to 'phone for Dr. Green."

"Up and out with Allsorts," Jane informed her appreciatively; she liked people who "rose with the lark," as she called it.

"Then I'll 'phone him myself," Marlene said, and she ran down to the telephone.

Dr. Green was not in; he had been called out very early to an urgent case, but he should have the message as soon as he returned.

"And ask him to come at once," Marlene said.

"Doctors are never in when they're wanted," was Jane's caustic remark when she heard. "I'll bring your tea now, Miss."

"I'll have a cup in the kitchen with you," Marlene answered, for she felt a little apprehensive.

It was so unlike Isabel to refuse her morning tea! So unlike her to ask to be left alone, especially with the curtains drawn, for Isabel loved the sunshine.

"Do you think she is really—ill?" Marlene asked as she watched Jane making the tea.

"Well, you saw for yourself," Jane replied bluntly. She, too, was feeling more disturbed than she cared to admit.

Marlene shivered and drew her dressing-gown more closely around her. "I suppose we ought to tell Mr. Chippendale," she said presently. "Is he up?"

"Up, and down in that old shed."

Jane brought the teapot to the table and was beginning to pour out when the lobby door opened and Allsorts bounded in, followed by his master.

"Heavens! And me in my dressing-gown," Marlene said in a dismayed undertone.

Jane glanced at her ironically.

"Dressing-gowns are a lot more decent than some frocks," she remarked. "I'll get another cup for you, sir," she told Strasmore as he hesitated in the hall.

"Anything the matter?" he asked as he joined Marlene.

Her eyes were troubled as she answered:

"Isabel doesn't seem so well; I've sent for Dr. Green."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

Marlene shook her head. "It may not be anything serious, but she looks so different, and she doesn't even want to talk," she added with a pathetic smile.

Jane had departed to scrub the already spotless front door steps, so there was nobody to see when Strasmore suddenly took Marlene's hand in his, holding it in a warm clasp.

"She'll be all right," he said with quiet confidence.

"Don't worry—I am sure she will be all right."

Marlene looked up at him. "Well, if *you* say so," she answered, with an attempt at light-heartedness, but there were tears in her eyes. Tears because the clasp of his hand was so comforting, so exactly what she needed—an understanding gesture which Hugh would never have given her. Hugh would have been much more likely to say callously, "Well, the old girl's had

her day—and she's always been a bit of a nuisance, hasn't she?"

There was a slight sound at the open back door which led to the garden and Chippendale appeared.

His spectacles were up on his forehead, but he jerked them down to their rightful position as he looked from one to the other before asking in his gentle way:

"Anything the matter, my dear?"

Marlene had forgotten that her hand was still in Strasmore's clasp, so she made no attempt to withdraw it as she answered, unconscious that she was echoing his own words of quiet confidence: "She'll be all right—don't worry. We have sent for the doctor because she seems a little weak and—tired. But I am sure she will be all right."

The old man looked pathetically distressed.

"Do you think she would like to see me?" he asked, but Marlene shook her head.

"I don't think so, dear—not just now. She wants to sleep."

And then, suddenly, realisation returned, so that she flushed and drew her hand quickly from Strasmore's clasp. "I must get dressed. Dr. Green may be here directly," and she hurried away.

Chippendale jerked his spectacles up on to his forehead again and pulled an old silver watch from his pocket.

"Still half an hour before breakfast," he said a little vaguely, and then with a glance at Strasmore: "I have a small job of work I should like to finish. If I am wanted you know where to find me." But at the door he turned to say, "I am glad you are here, Michael."

"Thank you, sir."

Chippendale rubbed his forehead thoughtfully.

"I once read somewhere," he remarked slowly, "that the finest definition of a friend is 'the first person who comes in when all the world has gone out.' You may have heard it?"

"I shall remember it," Strasmore answered.

Chippendale touched his arm with a half-shy gesture of approval.

"No need for me to have quoted that to *you*," he said quietly, and pattered away. . . .

Dr. Green pronounced that there was nothing seriously wrong with Isabel, except that she was suffering more from her ceaseless war activities than from her fall, and in consequence her heart was a little weakened.

"Keep her quiet, and don't let her talk too much," he told Marlene with a smile. An order which, in spite of Isabel's drowsiness, it was difficult to enforce, for every time Marlene tiptoed into her room, not liking to leave her alone for long, she would raise her head from the pillows and ask:

"Is that you, dear? So nice to have you home again!" before she rambled on in her usual manner, giving an incoherent account of something quite unimportant to anyone but herself.

Later in the morning, when Marlene had succeeded in coaxing her to drink a little hot milk, she said happily:

"And so the fifty pounds came in very useful, didn't it? I am so glad."

"Very useful, dear. I can never thank you enough for your generosity."

Isabel laughed weakly, closing her eyes again.

"Not *my* generosity! You must thank our good friend Michael."

"*Michael!*" Marlene's heart almost stopped beating as she waited for Isabel to speak, but she appeared to be half asleep.

Michael's money! So once again Gladys Trounce had been right, unless Isabel's mind was wandering and confused.

Marlene sat for some time in the darkened room, stunned by Isabel's vague admission and by her own angry confusion.

If only Isabel would tell her more!

Michael's money! How dared he do such a thing, and *why* had he done it? How could Isabel have permitted it, if it was true?

The frock she was wearing now had been bought with some of that fifty pounds, and the shoes as well! She had never felt more humiliated in her life—especially as Gladys evidently knew all about it. And who could have told Gladys? Was it Strasmore himself? Marlene's cheeks burned.

"How *dared* he?" she whispered. A man who was little more than a stranger to her!

But that's untrue, a voice seemed to reproach her through the silence. He was *never* a stranger to you!

Not a stranger? The man whom Gladys had boasted she could whistle back to his allegiance whenever it suited her?

Jane cautiously opened the door and announced in a stage whisper that Mr. Clifford was downstairs.

"Mr. Clifford!" Marlene frowned as she rose to her feet, suddenly remembering that Hugh had promised to ring her last night and had not done so. Not that she cared! And now he had arrived—without letting her know, and Isabel so poorly!

Marlene went downstairs very slowly, angry with herself, angrily ashamed because she knew she had no wish to see him.

There is nothing so dead as a dead love! . . . That was one of Gladys's favourite assertions which Marlene had always angrily contradicted, declaring that if love could die it had never been love at all! But hadn't she once believed that she cared so much for Hugh she could have died for him if necessary? And yet this morning the knowledge that he was in the house left her unmoved, except for a feeling of irritation.

Hugh came to the sitting-room door as he heard her step and spoke eagerly:

"Is that you, darling? So sorry I couldn't ring you last night. How are you?"

"All right, thank you, but Isabel isn't too well." And then she wished she hadn't mentioned Isabel as he laughed.

"Bad luck! . . . and, of course, she's making the most of it! Talking nineteen to the dozen as usual!"

"Dr. Green says her heart is weak, and that she must be kept quiet."

Hugh laughed again. "You'll have your work cut out to do that," he warned her, and then, as she led the way back into the sitting-room,

"No kiss for me this morning?"

To Marlene's infinite relief the appearance of Jane in the doorway saved her from a reply.

"How many to lunch, please, Miss Marlene?"

It was Clifford who answered. "I shan't be staying, Jane—I have to go on to Bentley——"

Marlene unconsciously gave a little sigh of relief, and her voice was more friendly as she asked—

“To Bentley? On business, I suppose!”

He made a grimace.

“So-called,” he admitted ruefully. “May I look in again on my way back, or would you rather I didn’t? You don’t seem exactly overjoyed to see me!”

“I’m sorry, Hugh—but I’m worried about Isabel.”

“Nonsense!” he retorted briskly. “She’ll be all right. Old maids always imagine they are going to die if they only get a headache.”

Marlene flushed. “Isabel isn’t a bit like that,” she protested.

“Well, kiss me and say you love me,” Hugh commanded, and he drew her into his arms just as the tall figure of Strasmore appeared at the open window.

“Sorry!” he apologised lightly, as Clifford frowned and released Marlene from his clasp. “Chippendale thinks he left his pipe on the window sill and asked me to fetch it. How are you, Clifford?”

“Top hole, thanks.”

Strasmore picked up Chippendale’s shabby old briar.

“I’ll just deliver the goods. See you later,” and he walked away.

“That chap hates me,” Clifford said, and then as the garden gate clanged he glanced towards the window and his frown deepened.

“Yet another admirer!” he remarked dryly. “Young Trounce! I think I had better take my departure. See you later, darling.”

“Yes,” Marlene agreed. She followed him to the front door where he exchanged a few words with Stuart

Trounce and then drove away in the expensive-looking car which was at the gate.

"I am sorry to hear about Miss Wood," Stuart said when he and Marlene were alone. "It's not like her to be ill. Is there anything I can do for you, dear?"

"Nothing, thank you. We've just got to keep her quiet. Won't you come in?"

She was relieved when he refused.

"I've got some commissions to do in the village for the Mater. By the way—Gladys is coming home to-night!—she rang up this morning."

"To-night! . . . I thought she had decided to stay with Dollic for another fortnight!"

Stuart laughed. "We thought so, too, but apparently they've had a few words about something; they generally end up that way! though my own idea is that Gladys has another reason for coming back."

"What—reason?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Strasmore," he said calmly.

There was an eloquent silence before Marlene spoke.

"Of course! . . . they've known one another some time, haven't they?"

He nodded. "Strasmore's well-off, too, and that always counts with our Gladys! Though I don't envy him—if he means to marry her," he added with brotherly candour.

Marlene laughed a little bitterly.

"Most marriages seem to end in failure," she said.

Stuart flushed. "It's not like you—to say a thing like that," he protested. "You always had such—nice ideas about marriage."

"I'm older—and wiser!"

The silence fell again, until he asked awkwardly,

"Then—it's no use asking if there's—any hope for me?"

She touched his arm remorsefully.

"I'm afraid not, dear! . . . I'm very fond of you, but——"

He interrupted. "You might grow more than—just fond—if you were my wife! . . . I'm so terribly in love with you, Marlene—I always have been—I'd do anything in the world for you!"

She hurriedly averted her eyes from his serious face.

Anything in the world! How often she had said, and written, just those very words to Hugh—words which were now quite meaningless as far as he was concerned.

"If you'd just—give me a trial——" Stuart pleaded. "I'm not such a bad sort!" but she only shook her head.

"I can't! . . . I'm sorry——"

Stuart winced. "Is it—still—Clifford?" he asked.

Marlene laughed then. "No, that's all over and done with," she told him. "All—over and done with!"

His face brightened. "Then I shan't give up hope! But I was afraid—seeing him here this morning——"

"I didn't even know he was coming," Marlene declared truthfully. But when Stuart had gone, in a spirit of defiance she deliberately made her way to Chippendale's shed, only to find Strasmore there alone, except for Allsorts who, as usual, was stretched at his master's feet. Strasmore was bending over the trestle table intent upon something, but he looked up as she entered and a faintly ironical smile crossed his face, as he said:

"I must apologise for—once again—appearing at an

unfortunate moment. I can only assure you it was not intentional."

And then as she was silent, at a loss for words—"You are amazingly generous with your favours, Miss Beech."

"Not so generous as you are," she said sharply. "But I am not in the happy position of being able to distribute money to less fortunate people."

Strasmore dropped the little wooden figure upon which he had been intent, and faced her.

He made no pretence of misunderstanding.

"Who told you?" he asked with blunt directness.

"Isabel——"

She saw his hand clench, though his voice was well under control when he spoke. "She gave me her word of honour she would never tell you."

Marlene laughed shakily. "It was not only Isabel—Gladys Trounce knew, too!" she flung at him defiantly.

"Gladys Trounce!"

"Yes! . . . She spoke of it before Isabel did—only I wouldn't believe her—but apparently she was right! . . . I don't know if you think it's kind—or clever—to humiliate me in this way—but it's an insult—which I shall never forgive—or forget."

She looked at him with eyes of passionate anger.

"I will repay your—charity, Mr. Strasmore, if I have to sell everything I possess to do so—and—if you think I want money from you—or from anyone, you're mistaken! . . . I want *nothing* from you, do you hear? Nothing, after this—not even your friendship."

And with her head held high in bitter defiance she turned to go, but he caught her by the shoulder.

"You little—*fool*!" he said hoarsely.

She struggled in vain to free herself.

"Let me go ! . . . how dare you !"

Strasmore held her fast.

"You may go when you've heard what I have to say, and not before. You may go when I've told you the—brutal truth—and shown you that you're wasting your time and—affection—on a man who isn't worth it ! . . . Clifford told me all about you when we were out East together."

And now his voice shook with uncontrollable passion as he went on, "You're not the only girl who was writing love-letters to him ! Not the only one who fondly believed she was to be his wife ! . . . He used to read extracts from letters he received—aloud—and laugh. He——"

Marlene gave a broken cry of frenzied rage.

"It's a *lie* ! . . . Hugh would never do such a thing ! It's a wicked—horrible—lie !" and almost beside herself, she raised her hand and struck him across the face.

Allsorts, who had been lying peacefully beside them, sprang snarling to his feet when he saw the blow, and would have flown at Marlene had not Strasmore seized him by the collar and torn him away, just as the homely figure of Mr. Chippendale appeared in the doorway.

He looked from one to the other with mild curiosity before he laid a soothing hand on the head of Allsorts who was still struggling unavailingly to free himself of his master's grip.

"And—who has upset this poor fellow ?" Chippendale inquired.

"I did," Marlene told him forcibly, but now she was very pale and her lips trembled. "No doubt Mr.

Strasmore will tell you how--and why!" and she walked defiantly away.

Chippendale jerked his spectacles down from his forehead.

"Dear, dear," he said mildly. "And I thought you two were such good friends, Michael!"

Strasmore let the dog go.

"I am afraid you were mistaken, sir," he said hoarsely.

"Dear, dear," Chippendale repeated, and then he smiled. "As the poet says—but I forget which poet—'The quarrels of lovers are like summer storms; everything is more beautiful when they have passed.' Have you never heard that quotation, Michael?"

CHAPTER IX

AT lunch time the table was only laid for two.

Marlene, summoned from Isabel's room by Jane when the meal was served, stopped in the dining-room doorway with an abrupt exclamation:

"Doesn't Mr. Chippendale want any lunch?" she asked.

Jane shrugged her shoulders as she replied:

"It's not Mr. Chippendale, Miss Marlene—I've told him lunch is on the table, and he's washing his hands. It's Mr. Strasmore who won't be in! He says he won't be in to supper, neither—he's spending the day with friends."

"Friends! . . . but he doesn't know anyone here," Marlene said impulsively, and then she tried to laugh.

"Oh well, it will help the rations out, won't it?" and then as Chippendale appeared, "You and I are lunching in solitary state to-day," she told him.

"You—and I!" the old man repeated absently. "Well, I am perfectly content with your company, my dear—if you are with mine."

He asked no questions, and did not even comment on Strasmore's absence, but more than once Marlene glanced towards his empty chair, angrily aware that she missed him.

Her fault he was not present, of course—she knew that—and something seemed to catch her by the throat as the thought flashed through her mind—supposing he never comes back!

Allsorts had gone with him, naturally—she missed the dog's great clumsy body, too—over which Jane always stepped so carefully so as not to disturb him as she collected the plates and dishes.

Spending the day with friends! Did that mean Gladys Trounce? But she was not expected home until the evening.

"You're not eating anything, my dear," Chippendale said mildly.

Marlene started, wondering angrily why she had been visualising Strasmore as she had first seen him—walking slowly along the country road—alone!

"I'm not very hungry," she explained.

It was some moments before Chippendale spoke again. "And what was the little trouble this morning?" * he inquired.

"Trouble—what do you mean?"

"With Michael."

She flushed as she met his kindly gaze.

"Oh, then he didn't tell you?"

The old man shook his head. "Did you imagine that he would?" he asked quietly.

She tried to laugh. "No, I can't say that I did, but—well, I'll tell you! . . . He was very—rude to me. He called me—a little fool—and I slapped his face," she added defiantly.

"Dear, dear," Chippendale said. He helped himself to a minute portion of cheese before he spoke again. "And why did he call you a little fool, I wonder?"

"Because——" Marlene pushed her plate away. "I'll tell you," she said constrainedly. It would be a relief to tell someone why there was an empty chair at the table, and she knew how completely Chippendale could be trusted.

"Before I went to London—to Dollie's—Isabel gave me fifty pounds!—I think I told you! . . . I thought it was most generous of her—fifty pounds is a lot of money, isn't it? . . . This morning—when I was in her room—she mentioned it—and asked if it had been useful—and when I thanked her again, she said—she told me—it was—Mr. Strasmere's money."

She looked at the old man with great indignation, expecting him to at least show astonishment, but Chippendale was carefully cutting the rind from his minute bit of cheese and did not even look up as he asked mildly.

"And then?"

"I was furious, of course! Wouldn't *you* have been if a—complete stranger had done a thing like that?"

He looked at her then, and there was unconscious reproof in his kindly eyes as he inquired, "And is that all Isabel told you?"

"*All* ! . . . isn't it enough ? "

The old man shook his head. "There is a sequel to most stories, my dear, and there is—quite definitely—one to this ! You see—after you went away—Isabel told me just what had happened ! I think poor soul, she felt a little unhappy about it. You know how conscientious she is ! . . . But having lost the fifty pounds which had taken her so long to save for you—several years, I understand——"

"*Lost* it ! "

Chippendale nodded.

"Yes—lost it ! . . . Apparently she drew it from the bank, so she told me—in one pound notes ! A most foolish thing to do, but as you know, Isabel is always careless with money, and on her way home—she had been shopping and was carrying quite a number of parcels—she just—lost it ! "

There was a profound silence before Marlene could find her voice. "But—what has that to do with—Mr. Strasmore ? "

The old man jerked his spectacles briskly down from his forehead.

"This is the sequel, my dear," he told her. "You see, Michael was the first person she met when she came hurrying home, in deep distress and in tears ! You know how sympathetic he is—or is that a trait in his character you have yet to discover ?—at any rate, she poured out the whole, sad story to him, with the result that he asked to be allowed to lend her the money—rather than that she—and you, too, my dear, should be disappointed. It was quite a business arrangement—Isabel insisted it should be ! She was to repay him—a little at a time, and the only condition Michael made

was, that to avoid further—disaster—the money should be given to you by cheque, as I understand it was, and that you should never be told he was in any way concerned with the transaction ! . . . ” He shook his head thoughtfully. “ Why Isabel should have broken that promise I cannot understand—unless—in her present state of health—her mind wandered a little, poor dear ! So you see, Marlene, if this kind action of Michael’s is your only cause for anger——”

“ But it isn’t—it isn’t——” she interrupted with passionate haste. “ Mr. Strasmore was very rude to me—about Hugh ! He said I was wasting my time on—on a man who isn’t worth it ! He said I wasn’t the only girl who had been—writing to him—when he was abroad—not the only girl who believed he was in love with her. As if it is any affair of *his*—daring to talk to me like that ! He called me a little fool——” Her voice broke on an angry sob, but Chippendale remained unmoved.

“ I could have told you—two years ago—that Clifford was never the right man for you, my dear,” he said calmly. “ But as things were then, I knew it would be quite useless. By the way——” he jerked his spectacles back again on to his forehead—“ I understand that Clifford was here—this morning.”

“ Yes, he was ! ” Marlene told him defiantly. “ And it’s nobody’s business if—if I—I decide to marry him after all.”

Chippendale sat very still for a moment, before he pushed back his chair and rose from the table.

“ Then there is nothing more to be said,” he remarked quietly. “ And now I must return to my work.” But Marlene caught his arm.

"Oh, don't go," she pleaded. "There's nobody I can talk to—except you—oh, don't go, Chippendale—I'm so—unhappy——" Her voice broke and she covered her face with her hands.

Chippendale looked at her thoughtfully before he carefully closed the half-open door and came back to where she was standing. "*Why* are you—unhappy?" he asked gently.

"Because—I don't *know* why!" Marlene whispered.

Chippendale drew her hands down from her face and held them in his gentle clasp.

"There is a verse," he said. "I shall alter it a little to suit my meaning—I hope with the poet's forgiveness and on my part sufficient skill for you to understand. This is it, my dear :

'Content stood waiting at my door,
And when I asked him where he was before—
"Here, all the time," he said. "I've never stirred,
Too eager in your search you passed me o'er—
And though I called, you neither saw nor heard." ' "

Marlene looked at him, and the tears were running down her cheeks.

"To—understand—*what*, Chippendale?" she faltered.

The old man pressed her hands and let them go.

"That Michael will—leave us—unless you ask him to stay," he answered, and he pattered away. . . .

Leave us! . . . Unless you ask him to stay!

Marlene brushed the tears from her eyes and looked at Strasmore's empty chair. Unless *she* asked him to

stay! . . . And she had told him she wanted nothing from him—not even his friendship!

Was that the truth, or—could it be there was something even greater which she had always wanted from him? From the first moment of their meeting, when she had felt that in some forgotten past, they must have been friends?

Jane's shrill voice broke into her confused thoughts.

"Telephone ringing, Miss Marlene—been ringing for the last five minutes! . . . I thought you'd be sure to hear it."

"The telephone! . . . Oh yes—I'll come."

It was Hugh Clifford, speaking a little irritably.

"I've been trying to get through to you for the last quarter of an hour. My confounded car has broken down, so I shan't be able to come over this evening." He laughed shortly as Marlene said absently, "Oh—bad luck!" just as that morning *he* had said it—about Isabel!

"You don't sound exactly heart-broken," he remarked.

Marlene laughed, wondering triumphantly what he would say were she to tell him truthfully, "I'm not! I don't care if I never see you again."

"I expect you'll easily find consolation—with so many other admirers about," Hugh said disagreeably.

"I hope so," she answered lightly, and then he asked with quick suspicion:

"Why—where are you going? Out with Strasmore or——" They were suddenly cut off, and with a sigh of relief Marlene replaced the receiver.

Where are you going? The same question again, but one to which she had at last found the answer.

Where are you going? Yes, with Michael Strasmore—if he would take her! . . .

She felt as if someone had suddenly torn a veil from her eyes, letting in unbroken sunshine as she went slowly upstairs to Isabel's room. *Unbroken* sunshine—when she did not even know if she would be forgiven for the hard things she had said to him only that morning.

It seemed impossible now that, in her foolish unjustifiable anger, she had ever struck him. No wonder Allsorts had sprung at her—Allsorts who loved his master!

She looked down at her right hand and quickly away again. If only she had known the whole truth—which she might *never* have known but for Chippendale!

"Love comes unseen—we only see it go!" . . .

How Gladys Trounce would laugh if anyone quoted that line to her. She would be sure to say ironically, "Oh, yes, we can see it *go* all right!" Marlene knew there was a time when she would most indignantly have contradicted her, declaring that real love never went.

She knew better now—or hadn't it been love she had once felt for Hugh Clifford? Life was so difficult and full of contradictions of which no simple explanation was possible.

Isabel called to her weakly as she reached her door:

"Is that you, Marlene?"

"Yes, dear."

Isabel was sitting up, her grey hair pathetically rumpled about her face.

"Draw the curtains back a little—I should like to see the afternoon sun," she said, and then as Marlene obeyed:

"I am feeling *much* better! . . . I have had such a nice long sleep. Do you believe in dreams, Marlene?"

"Dreams? I'm not sure, dear. I've had such funny ones sometimes."

Isabel laughed. "So have I! . . . Most *amusing* dreams! By the way, what *is* to-day? I seem to have lost count."

"It's Thursday."

"Oh dear!" Isabel sighed. "I did so *hope* it was Saturday because of that old saying about a Friday night's dream on a Saturday told, always coming true! Still"—she lay back on her pillows—"I shall pretend it *is* Saturday, and see what happens!"

Marlene laughed, glad that Isabel seemed so much more like her old self.

"Have you had such an exciting dream?" she asked.

Isabel nodded.

"A lovely dream. I dreamt I was at your wedding, darling——"

"My—wedding!"

"Yes. You looked so lovely—all in white satin and orange blossoms—though I don't suppose we should be able to get either nowadays, with these tiresome coupons to consider! . . . But there you were, with a long train, and a bouquet of lilies, walking up the aisle on Chippendale's arm. And Chippendale's boots squeaked! . . . You know his best ones always do!—I suppose because he wears them so seldom! And the organ was playing—and everything was just *perfect*, as a wedding should be—though I expect you would have to be married in a registrar's office, wouldn't you? because of catering difficulties. Not that I shouldn't love to invite *all* our friends—but we could put an

announcement in the papers to say everyone would be welcome at the church, as people so often do nowadays."

"And you were there too, of course, in the dream?" Marlene submitted lightly.

Isabel nodded. "Yes, I was there—at least, I was an onlooker, though I didn't seem to be sitting in the front pew exactly. Still, I was there! And I dare say I *was* in the front pew! I don't quite remember—though in other ways it was all so *real*!—and *unreal*, too, if you know what I mean! Like a fairy story, as dreams always are."

There was a little silence. Marlene was standing at the window, looking down the stretch of road which led to the village—the road along which she had seen Michael Strasmore walking—alone—that first morning!

"And—the bridegroom?" she asked with an effort at gaiety.

"Ah, the bridegroom," Isabel said regretfully. "Now it's very strange, but I haven't the slightest idea who he was, though something about him seemed quite familiar, and I was perfectly satisfied and happy that you were marrying the right man! . . . I know he was *there*, of course! It wouldn't have been a wedding *without* him, would it—even in a dream? . . . But I am quite positive that it wasn't Hugh Clifford, though Jane tells me he was here *this morning*," she added half-apologetically.

Marlene laughed. "No, it certainly wouldn't have been Hugh," she said.

Isabel smiled. "I'm so glad! Not that I have anything *against* Hugh. I always say he is one of the handsomest men I have ever seen—not that looks mean

anything at *all* to me! Oh no, it wasn't Hugh," she repeated confidently. "For one thing, he was a much *taller* man! I do remember *that* about him. Oh—and something else I've just remembered too! Fancy forgetting it! Allsorts was outside the church with a white bow on his collar! Of course they wouldn't let him in, would they? Though I can never see what harm there would be if they did. I remember, years ago, when I was in Scotland—right up in the north, in quite a small out-of-the-way village—the shepherds were allowed to take their dogs into the 'Kirk' as they called it. Such dear, well-behaved doggies they were! They lay in the aisle beside their masters, just as Allsorts would." She gave a sudden sigh. "Oh dear, I think I'm getting tired again."

Marlene turned hurriedly. "You're talking too much," she said gently. "Tell me the rest some other time. I shall refuse to be married at all if you excite yourself so much!" she scolded her.

Isabel smiled and obediently closed her eyes.

"Don't go away," she said. "And don't draw the curtains—I like the sunlight."

"I won't go away."

Marlene drew a chair to the window and sat down, facing the stretch of road which led to the village. Nobody in sight! Not the figure she longed to see, of a tall man, slightly lame and somewhat shabbily dressed, a tired-looking man!

Would he forgive her for her injustice to him? It was the only thing that mattered.

She smiled faintly as she thought of Isabel's quaint account of her dream. If only she had remembered who the bridegroom was! Not that Marlene believed

in dreams—perhaps nobody did, except those who wished to!

But Allsorts had been outside the church, with a white bow on his collar! . . .

"Marlene——" Isabel's voice broke in upon her troubled thoughts, and she turned her head quickly.

"Yes, do you want anything, dear?"

"No—only—I've just remembered who the bridegroom was! It's just come back to me—you know how things do—they come back all of a sudden, when you're quite sure you've completely forgotten what you were trying to remember!"

Marlene rose and walked over to the bedside.

"And—who—was it?" she asked faintly.

A little smile flickered across Isabel's face as she looked up at her.

"Michael—our dear friend Michael," she said dreamily. "Fancy my—ever forgetting! Such a pity it's not Saturday—after all, isn't it, dear?"

* * * * *

It seemed an endless day! Several times during the afternoon and evening Marlene wandered down to Chippendale's shed, but before she reached the door her courage failed her and she turned back.

Quiet and unobtrusive as he was (a nonentity, Hugh had once called him) there was something about Chippendale of which occasionally Marlene felt a little shy.

He sometimes showed such amazing intuition that it left her breathless; how, for instance, had he known that Michael Strasmore was the cause of her restless unhappiness when, until to-day, she had not realised it herself?

A dozen times she went to the gate and looked down the road with strained attention, even though Strasmore had said he would not be in to supper that evening.

Where was he, and what was he thinking of the angry injustice she had shown to him?

It seemed to be growing dark earlier than usual; already Chippendale had lit the lamp in his work-shed. By its light she could see the outline of his head and shoulders, bending over the trestle-table. What was he making now, she wondered? And her heart ached as she thought of the little figure of Loneliness which he had so skilfully remodelled.

"Does she—the smaller figure—remind you of anyone?" he had asked her, and when she admitted in surprise, "Why, it's a little like me!" he had nodded with deep satisfaction, admitting that had been his intention.

Had he, even then, guessed that although she had not been aware of it, there had existed a strange affinity between herself and Michael? How blind and foolish she had been not to have understood! Not even when Strasmore had admitted, in his quiet way, that the 'pin-up' girl of whom she had chafed him was herself!

Was it jealousy that had prompted his bitter remarks concerning Hugh Clifford? And how much truth was there in his passionate assertion that she was not the only girl who had been writing love-letters to him, in the fond belief that she was to be his wife?

Why hadn't she realised the truth that day in the train when he had told her they had almost everything in common, if only she would choose to admit it; when, having said that she hated him for his out-spokenness,

he had answered, "Perhaps, some day, you will love me—just a little—instead."

She felt now as if, like a child in overwhelming rage, she had deliberately shut and locked a door between herself and happiness.

"Content stood waiting at my door,
And when I asked him where he was before—
'Here, all the time,' he said. 'I've never stirred' . . ."

Chippendale had understood and perhaps Isabel also, or why had she told her of that dream?

A few raindrops came pattering down, and with a sigh Marlene returned to the house to meet an aggrieved Jane in the hall.

"Supper's ready, Miss Marlene, and I've been looking for you high and low!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was only in the garden. Is Mr. Chippendale coming?"

"I've taken his bread and cheese to him—he's busy."

"Oh!" . . . Marlene glanced at the supper table.
"But you've laid for two!"

Jane carefully smoothed a crease in the spotless cloth.

"I thought maybe, as it's started to rain, Mr. Strasmore'd change his mind and come in," she answered.

"Oh!" Marlene said again, but she knew well enough he would not come.

The house seemed painfully quiet, and she had never felt more lonely. The only sound to be heard was the

increasing patter of the raindrops against the window, and now and again a gentle tap-tapping from Chippendale's workshop. Wonderful to be as happy and contented as he was, and with so very little!

Marlene wasn't hungry, and rather than face Jane's aggrieved disapproval she tiptoed out into the garden with the remains of her supper, depositing it on a grassy corner for the birds. It would all be gone in the morning and Jane would never know! It was still raining steadily and the sky was grey and unbroken.

Marlene helped Jane to clear away and went up to Isabel's room, only to find her peacefully asleep, and again that sense of lonely unwantedness took possession of her as she turned away.

If there was only someone to talk to! At the moment she felt she would even have welcomed old Dontcher-know and his fulsome flattery.

That visit to London seemed so very far away and long ago!

As she crossed the landing she saw that the door of the "room at the top of the stairs" was half open, and unconsciously she moved towards it.

Jane had not yet drawn the curtains, and in the grey evening light she saw with relief that it was much the same as usual. Hair brushes on the dressing-table, and Allsorts' best collar which he only wore on special occasions. No sign of things being packed up for a possible departure!

As if there *would* be, she told herself in amused scorn. Strasmore was not the man to walk out at a moment's notice, no matter how angry and embittered he might feel!

With a half-sigh Marlene turned away and went

downstairs again, just as the hall clock began to strike nine.

Only nine! . . . Would the evening *never* pass!

She looked out of the sitting-room window into the greyness of the garden, through which the light from Chippendale's workshop still shone steadily.

Perhaps after all, she would go down and talk to him; better than sitting alone in the silent house. She was taking her coat from the hall rack, when there was a step on the garden path—a step she knew, and which for an instant almost stopped her heart-beats, as she stood motionless, uncertain whether to stay or to run away.

And then the heavy paws of Allsorts pushed the closed front door wide open, and in he bounded, his shaggy coat wet and bedraggled.

He began to shake himself vigorously until, seeing Marlene he stopped, looking towards her with dubious eyes, his tail wagging very slowly—as if uncertain what his welcome was to be.

It was Jane who settled the question. Having heard the noisy opening of the door, she appeared from the kitchen to discover what had happened, and seeing the dog's wet coat, she rushed towards him in concern.

"Oh, the poor fellow! . . . Wet to the skin, now, aren't you? Come with Jane, and she'll wipe you nice and dry! And I shouldn't be surprised if she doesn't find you a bone-y-woney, too!"

"Allsorts has had his supper," Strasmore told her, as he freed himself of his shabby raincoat.

Marlene found her voice then—a little unsteadily.

"Have you had yours, Mr. Strasmore?"

"Yes—thank you."

Allsorts had readily escorted Jane to the kitchen.

"What a change in the weather," Marlene said vaguely.

"Rain is badly needed," Strasmore replied calmly. He followed her into the sitting-room. "How is Miss Wood?" he asked.

"She seems a little better, thank you."

"Good."

There was a poignant silence before he turned to go, and then Marlene spoke.

"Mr. Strasmore——"

"Yes?"

She flushed beneath his indifferent gaze.

"I—I—want to ask your pardon——"

He raised his brows ironically.

"Really! . . . There is not the slightest occasion to do so—I assure you that I once knocked a man down—with far less provocation than I gave you this morning—it is for me to apologise—if anyone! . . . It was—unpardonable of me to have said what I did——"

She made a half movement towards him, then checked herself.

"Was it true?" she asked tensely. "I mean—what you said about—Hugh Clifford?"

"I am not a liar," he answered bluntly. "Though, in this instance, I admit that the truth was no excuse. I hope you will—forgive me."

"Will you—forgive—~~me~~?"

They looked at one another in silence before Marlene went on distressfully, "I mean—for—misjudging you—about—that money. I didn't know the truth—not until Chippendale told me—I thought—I didn't know—that it was just—kindness—to Isabel—and I want to—thank you—to say how sorry I am——"

She waited breathlessly for him to speak—afraid to look at him. Her eyes were turned to the window and the darkness outside which was no longer broken by the steady light from Chippendale's workshop.

Where was he, she wondered painfully? Perhaps he had gone upstairs to say good night to Isabel as he did every evening since she had been ill! If only he would come and help her—not that anyone could help her to break down Strasmore's icy indifference which, she felt despairingly, was like a wall of steel between them.

Was it real or assumed—and what could she say to make him understand? Words were such useless, empty things when one's heart was overflowing with passionate remorse and longing. It was like a cold hand at her throat when Strasmore said quietly, as if it was of no account;

"Shall we agree to forgive one another—and to forget? I can promise you, you will not be troubled for very much longer with my unwelcome presence, and then——"

She gave a little cry.

"You mean—you are going—away?"

"As soon as Miss Wood is well enough for me to explain my reason, and to thank her for her—great kindness——"

"Going—away!" Marlene repeated dully.

Neither of them had heard the heavy step of Mr. Chippendale as he came slowly down the stairs, or realised that he was standing in the doorway, until he spoke——

"Marlene! . . . Michael!" . . . His voice died away, and there was an unbroken silence until Marlene whispered tragically,

"Isabel?"

Mr. Chippendale put his hand on the lintel of the door as if to steady himself, and suddenly he looked much older—very old—and very tired!

"I went to say—good night to her——" he said slowly. "I went to say—good night to her—but it was—good-bye!"

CHAPTER X

MARLENE had not believed it possible she could miss Isabel so much! The house seemed so unnaturally quiet without the sound of her voice which had seldom ceased to be heard—usually talking about nothing! A dozen times a day she found herself thinking impulsively, when Jane came to consult her on some household matter—"I must ask Isabel!" Sometimes she half turned to go in search of her before she stopped with a queer feeling of defeatism as she remembered that Isabel was no longer there.

For the first time on record, Mr. Chippendale had closed his little workshop and wandered about the garden in his best suit, looking utterly lost.

Everyone was very kind. Even Mrs. Parsons who kept the village general store, called to ask if there was anything she could do to help, and offered to send up the required rations instead of expecting them to be collected, as she generally did.

"I shall miss the dear lady," she told Marlene. "Always so friendly and cheerful! It did your heart good to see her walk in!" The good soul entirely

forgot, as people do in such circumstances, that more often than not it would have done her heart infinitely more good had Isabel occasionally cut short her chatter, and had walked *out*!

Stuart Trounce was Marlene's devoted shadow, trying by every means in his power to help her, and to express his sympathy, and she had not the heart to tell him that it would have been much kinder had he left her alone.

Hugh Clifford wrote, an eloquent letter of sympathy, rather spoilt at the finish by stating that he was sure she had so much to see to, that he felt it would be kinder of him to stay away at any rate for the present, which really meant that sorrow of any sort was an emotion he always firmly avoided.

Let me know when you want to see me, and you know I shall be there, were his concluding words.

Marlene laid the letter aside indifferently, finding it hard to believe that so short a time ago, she would have been cut to the heart because he had not immediately come to see her.

In the days which followed Isabel's sudden death, the only two people who really counted in Marlene's life were Chippendale and Michael Strasmore.

They were both so unobtrusively kind and helpful, that without them she felt she must have been utterly lost. She seldom saw Strasmore alone—which she felt was deliberate on his part—but she also knew that for the moment anyway, he was the mainstay of the house, making all necessary arrangements, and helping Chippendale, who was always entirely at a loss in an emergency.

Strasmore had said no more about leaving them,

though Marlene was in constant dread that he would do so—and her heart seemed to stand still when, one morning Gladys Trounce, who had called to enquire whether there was any shopping she could do for her in the village, asked suddenly,

“How long is Michael staying with you?”

Marlene had been watering one of Isabel’s cherished aspidistras at the time, and she unknowingly spilt the water on the polished table as she answered:

“I—don’t know! Why do you ask?”

Gladys shrugged her shoulders.

“Well—he told Stuart he was thinking of leaving—some time ago—before Isabel died—so I wondered whether—perhaps—he would care to come to us—if you really want to be rid of him!”

“If we—really want to be rid of him!”

Gladys indicated the spilt water.

“You’re making rather a mess of things, aren’t you?” she submitted carelessly.

Marlene started. “Oh! . . . how careless of me—I’ll get a cloth.”

Making rather a mess of things! . . . Wasn’t it what she had been doing for a long time, she wondered sadly, as she hurried to the kitchen where Jane was on her knees, brushing Allsorts’ thick coat. Following Isabel’s death, Jane had—with many tears—fastened a black bow to Allsorts’ collar, which Chippendale had instantly removed.

“It is the last thing Miss Isabel would wish,” he told her gently. Marlene had overheard his words, and her eyes had filled with tears as she remembered Isabel’s incoherent account of her dream in which she had seen Allsorts outside the church door, with a white bow on

his collar. So perhaps it was true that dreams always go by contraries.

This morning, when Marlene entered the kitchen, Jane sat back on her heels, regarding the dog with pride.

"A picture, isn't he, Miss Marlene? His coat never shone like that when he first came here!" She sighed. "The house won't be the same without him—lolloping all over the place—will it?" She stroked the dog's head affectionately. "Jane'll miss you something cruel," she told him sadly.

It was with a supreme effort that Marlene forced herself to speak.

"Why do you talk like that? Who said that—Allsorts—is going?"

"Who *said* it?" Jane rose clumsily to her feet. "It's what everyone in the village is saying! That Mr. Strasmore'll be leaving us quite soon——" She regarded the girl with faint suspicion. "Don't tell me you didn't *know*, Miss Marlene?"

Marlene laughed. "If the whole village knows, I suppose I ought to know, too!" she answered, as she picked up the dish-cloth and turned away.

Gladys was standing by the sitting-room window smoking a cigarette.

"As I was saying," she said calmly, "If it will be a help to you, I know Mother will be pleased to put Michael up. We've got tons of room, and she loves having a house full. She likes Michael, too—though she doesn't know him frightfully well. As a matter of fact, I'd like her to know him better as——" she stopped.

"As—what?" Marlene asked.

Gladys hesitated. "Oh well, you know what I told you—or have you forgotten?" she submitted airily.

"You mean—about—whistling him back?" Marlene said very quietly.

Gladys laughed complacently.

"So you remember that, do you? Well—perhaps—as the Walrus said 'The time has come'—I'm not getting any younger—I shall be twenty-seven next month—and by the look of things, life's going to be pretty rotten for the next few years—unless one has plenty of money—so take it all round, I think I should be a fool to miss such a chance!"

There was a deep silence before Marlene spoke.

"'Marry for love, where money is' in fact," she quoted lightly.

"Oh—*love*!" Gladys gave her usual shrug. "I like Michael all right—better than any other man I know at the moment, but I'm not one of those sentimental idiots who fondly imagine that what is called 'love' counts more than anything else—especially nowadays! It's just a—utility sort of thing—like these vile stockings," she glanced down at her feet. "It soon ladders, and wears out," she added comically, and then as Marlene remained silent, "Why don't *you* get married? Chippendale would be all right with Jane—and it won't be much fun for you here with everything to look after, will it?"

"Whom do you suggest I should marry?" Marlene asked with faint irony.

Gladys looked at her quizzically.

"Well, there's my devoted brother! . . . or you could get Hugh back if you liked, couldn't you?"

"You mean—if I followed your example and—started whistling?"

Gladys chuckled.

"You might do worse—and you were keen enough on him once, weren't you? It's a pity he hasn't more money—not that money matters much to you—or so you always say."

"I don't know anything about Hugh's—money! I've never asked him," Marlene said, but she remembered with a strange feeling of humiliation how once—when Hugh had lightly remarked that he was not overburdened with this world's goods—she had told him eagerly that if he hadn't a shilling to his name it would make no difference to her love for him!

Love! Just a youthful, emotional attraction, which had died so easily.

There was a short silence before Gladys said bluntly,

"Well, I know Michael helped him out of a fine mess on *one* occasion——"

Marlene raised startled eyes.

"Michael—helped—Hugh?"

Gladys nodded.

"A man in the hospital where I first met Michael—let the cat out of the bag. I forget the details, I wasn't particularly interested at the time, and I don't know how it came out! Furze, the man's name was—he died, poor fellow!—but he told me that if it hadn't been for Michael, Hugh would have been cashiered—or whatever they do to Army officers who make fools of themselves." She knocked the ash from her cigarette into the pot of Isabel's favourite aspidistra—and Marlene said sharply,

"Don't *do* that——"

Gladys stared at her in astonishment.

"Don't do—what?"

Marlene tried to laugh then. "I'm sorry—but—Isabel—always—hated anyone to put cigarette ash in her fern-pots."

"Oh!" Gladys said blankly. She picked up her handbag. "Well, I'd better be going—sure there's nothing I can do for you down the village?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

But at the door Gladys turned to say smilingly, "You wouldn't have to whistle very long for old Dontcherknow, if you'd fancy yourself as Lady David Webb——! Cheerio," and she took her departure.

Marlene watched her drive away with the strange feeling that this girl—whom she had once called her friend—had suddenly become almost like a stranger, and not a very prepossessing one at that! Gladys was so heartless and self-confident—nothing seemed sacred to her—she would blurt out anything and everything with complete disregard for the fact that by doing so she might be hurting someone unspeakably.

Was it true that Michael had helped Hugh when he was in money difficulties? Gladys was so seldom wrong in her blunt assertions. But Strasmore disliked Hugh! . . .

The figure of Chippendale—(so unlike himself in his best suit, which Marlene knew he was only wearing because it had always pleased Isabel)—came into sight on the little square lawn.

He looked so lonely, walking slowly, with his hands—usually busily occupied—clasped behind his back, his head downbent, that, forgetting herself and her unhappy

thoughts in a sudden, warm desire to cheer and comfort him, Marlene hurriedly left the room and ran across the garden to him, slipping her hand through his arm.

He looked down at her with vague eyes.

"Well, my dear! I thought Gladdie was with you."

Gladdie! Marlene had never before heard him use the name which had always been Isabel's prerogative.

"She's gone," she told him, and then: "Why don't you unlock the shed, Chippendale? I think Isabel would be pleased to see you working again."

Chippendale turned his head away, and it was a moment before he replied:

"Do you think she would? I was just—wondering——"

"I am sure she would, dear," Marlene said gently.

He glanced down at his best suit.

"I'll have to change," he submitted dubiously, then suddenly he smiled as if the thought pleased him. "But it won't take me a moment." He thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out a bunch of keys. There were quite a dozen of them, and Marlene knew that Chippendale had long ago forgotten which boxes or cupboards they unlocked—all but the one which she knew fitted the door of the workshop, the only key which was of any value to him. She smiled as she took the little bunch from him.

"I'll unlock the door and open the window for you while you go and change," she told him, and then as he turned away she drew him back to her and kissed his cheek.

"I'll wait till you come."

Chippendale nodded and smiled.

"You know, my dear," he said simply, "I think you are right, and that Isabel is very pleased," and he ambled away towards the house looking quite like himself again.

Marlene crossed the garden, unlocked the door of the workshop and opened the window. The little shed felt musty as if it needed air, but it was scrupulously tidy, and the only object on the trestle-table was the little carved piece which Chippendale had re-modelled and called *Companionship*.

It looked a little lonely standing there in the sunlight—no, not lonely, surely! Marlene thought with a sudden throb of hope, for there were two figures now, a man and a girl, and the girl was clinging to the man's arm, looking up at him.

Had Chippendale placed it there intentionally, and was that why he had given her his keys? As a rule he guarded them so jealously, never allowing anyone to unlock the door of his beloved workshop. She looked down at the little bunch with misty eyes. Useless, most of them, but there was one that mattered—one which meant all the world to Chippendale, which guarded the door of his treasure house where real happiness was to be found.

Might she take it as a happy augury for herself because he had trusted her with that key? In spite of the many mistakes she had made?

The sunlight, streaming in through the open door, was suddenly blotted out by a man's figure, and raising her eyes quickly Marlene saw Michael Strasmore standing there watching her.

Allsorts, who of course was at his master's heels, bounded forward so suddenly and unexpectedly that

Marlene started back, and Strasmore said quickly, remembering the day when the dog had sprung to his defence :

"He won't hurt you—you needn't be afraid of him."

Marlene tried to laugh before, with a desperate feeling that she must try to bridge the gulf which she knew still lay between them, she said breathlessly :

"I'm not nearly so afraid of him as—as I am of you !"

"Of me !" Strasmore raised his brows ironically. "Do you really expect me to believe that ?" He glanced round the little workshop. "I thought Chippendale must be here as I saw the door was open. I've brought the stuff he wanted which I ordered some weeks ago. It's been a long time coming, but here it is at last !" and he laid a small parcel on the trestle-table.

"What is it ?" Marlene asked, not because she was really interested, but because she instinctively felt that Strasmore had no intention of staying unless she could find some means of detaining him.

"Only a patent mending liquid," he explained casually. "Chippendale broke one of his carved pieces"—he indicated the twin figures of *Companionship*—"that is it, and I happened to know of this stuff which I can guarantee will do the job all right. It will mend most things if it's properly applied."

Marlene had picked up the little carving.

"I didn't know it was—broken," she said unsteadily. "But I can see now that it is." And then as Strasmore half turned to go she asked, "And will—your patent stuff—mend a—broken friendship, too ?"

Strasmore looked at her steadily.

"I am afraid that is asking a little too much—even of such a skilled workman as Chippendale."

Marlene laid the little carving down and, as she did so, the two figures fell apart.

There was a profound silence before she could speak.

"You're very—unforgiving—aren't you, Mr. Strasmore?"

He half shrugged his shoulders.

"Am I? Perhaps! But it is certainly not true, as you were once informed, that I can easily be 'whistled back' to a—despised allegiance."

His voice was bitterly sarcastic, and Marlene flushed in distress as she said painfully:

"But you can't think I—*believed* it, can you?"

"Does it matter what I think?" His eyes softened reluctantly as he continued: "Don't let us quarrel again, Marlene. You have enough to contend with as it is, and I am certainly not worth any woman's consideration."

She took a quick step towards him. "You once told me that the photograph you—said you—fell in love with—was mine!"

Strasmore laughed. "Did I? But that was before I had ever met you!"

She winced, but her voice was very quiet when she spoke again.

"And you once told me that—perhaps—some day—I should—love you—just a little!"

She saw his hand clench as he answered with cold courtesy, "An unpardonable thing to have said to any lady, as I am sure you will agree."

She drew a sharp breath.

"But it was—true!" she whispered.

"True!" Strasmore laughed. "Do you expect me to believe that also? After all the hard and unjust things you have said to me and thought about me? Do you expect me for one moment to believe it when, only a few weeks ago, you and Clifford——"

She interrupted with passionate eagerness.

"I never want to see Hugh Clifford again! I can't explain—and you wouldn't understand if I tried to! You're so different to Hugh—different to any other man I have ever met, and before I met you I never dreamed that falling in love—no! that *loving* someone could happen as—as——" She made a gesture of despair. "I can't explain," she repeated, "and you wouldn't understand if I could! But it's *true*! And if you go away—as people say you mean to go——" Her voice broke. "Oh, you *won't* go, will you?" she pleaded.

Strasmore turned abruptly from her and stared at the sunshine which was streaming in at the window. It seemed an eternity before he replied, "I have made arrangements to go—I leave next week. I have told Chippendale." He suddenly swung round, looking at her with harsh condemnation as he said almost brutally, "You can't make a fool of me as you do of—other men! I've learned my lesson very thoroughly, but I'm still not afraid of the truth, and so you shall hear it before I go! I'm not a sentimental fool. I never believed in 'love'—for want of a less hackneyed word—until I saw your photograph in Clifford's possession. Yours was not the only one, as I told you before, but the moment I saw it it seemed as if—as if I had known you all my life! as if—if you had always belonged to me, so that I made up my mind—as soon as I could get back to England I would find you and see whether, by

any possible chance, you would feel the same way about me ! . . . as if we had always been friends—as if——”

He stopped abruptly and again turned away as Marlene closed her eyes, recalling their first meeting and her own strange conviction that somewhere she and this man had met before, and never as strangers !

She started as if she had been roughly awakened from sleep when Strasmore spoke again.

“Well, we met ! And I was foolishly convinced, more surely than ever, that you were the one girl in the world for me !” He laughed as if in self-scorn. “Your photograph was in my pocket that morning you stopped and asked me where I was going ! It seemed like—Fate—that we should meet as we did ! . . . I never liked Clifford, as you know ; I never believed he—seriously hoped to marry you—and yet——”

“And yet,” Marlene interrupted very quietly, “you helped him when he was in trouble—by lending him money.”

Strasmore made no attempt to deny it—did not even ask how she knew ; he only said very directly :

“For your sake, and because I was afraid—because I imagined that you might still care for him.”

“I never cared for him—not as I do for you ! It was all quite different—so different that now, when I look back, I can only feel amazed—and ashamed—at my own stupidity ! I know now that I should never have been happy with him—I realised it as soon as we met again—that night in London——”

“As soon as you met again ! . . . when I saw you in his arms !”

She made a gesture of despair.

“But that meant nothing . . . *nothing* ! I don’t

expect you to believe me! I can hardly believe it myself, but—you and he are so utterly different——”

“I am a rich man and he is a poor man! Is *that* the difference?” Strasmore submitted harshly.

The silence of eternity seemed to fall between them until Allsorts raised his head and looked up at his master, whining softly as if he could sense trouble and was venturing a humble protest.

Then Marlene spoke, quite dispassionately, as if she was past all feeling.

“I don’t think we—can—hurt one another any more, can we? So I will go.” And she walked past him and out into the sunlight.

Strasmore stood like a statue, his hands clenched, his lips tightly set. He made no attempt to follow her, though the sound of her light footsteps seemed to beat upon his heart until he could no longer hear them. . . .

Marlene met Chippendale at the open front door. He had changed into his old every-day clothes and his spectacles were pushed up on to his forehead.

“Have I been very long?” he asked in mild surprise. “I thought you said you would wait for me.”

“Mr. Strasmore is there,” Marlene answered. “He has brought the stuff you wanted—the stuff for mending broken things.” She laughed. “It’s a pity about ‘Companionship,’ isn’t it? I rather liked it!”

She would have walked past him, but the old man barred the way.

“Where are you going, my dear?” he asked, and then as she shook her head, avoiding his kindly gaze, he took her hand.

"Come back with me, and let me show you how simple it is to repair the foolish damage which we all do at some time or another in our lives." But with a little incoherent sound, which was half a sob, Marlene broke away from him and ran into the house.

Isabel's was not the only empty chair at supper-time that night, though neither Marlene nor Chippendale commented on Strasmore's absence. It was a silent meal. And after next week it would always be like that, Marlene knew, just she and Chippendale. Funny how swiftly and irrevocably life could alter, when one imagined it would go on—perhaps for ever—in the same way, and with the same companions!

Where would Strasmore go? Not to the Trounces, she was sure—even though Gladys had appeared so confident!

Oh well, what did it matter? . . . What did anything matter?

She went, as she usually did, to the kitchen to help wash up the supper things.

"The house seems quiet this evening," Jane remarked. "Still, I suppose we've got to get used to it," she added with a sigh, and then as Marlene remained silent, "Believe it or not, I shall miss that dear doggie more than I can say! Coming in every morning like he does for his boney-woney—wagging his old tail! . . . I suppose Mr. Strasmore wouldn't like to leave him with us when he goes, would he?"

"I'm afraid not."

There was a brief silence before Jane spoke again.

"Why he wants to go at all for beats me! So often he's told me how much he likes the room at the top of the stairs, and how at home he feels with us all." She

looked sideways at Marlene: "I suppose he's *really* made up his mind?" she submitted.

"Yes."

Jane had a sudden brain-wave.

"Now why don't *you* ask him to stay, Miss Marlene? Maybe he feels he's in the way now Miss Isabel's gone—bless her heart! Maybe he feels you'd be glad if he went—but if *you* was to *ask* him to stay——"

Marlene laughed.

"I have asked him, but it was no use!" And then, because she felt at the end of her endurance, she turned and hurried from the kitchen.

The front door was open and outside it was not yet dark.

Marlene hesitated in the hall, once again conscious of the silence of the house and its unusual feeling of loneliness. Across the garden she could see the light shining through the window of Chippendale's workshop where, no doubt, he was carefully mending the broken figure of Companionship. The old man would be kind and sympathetic if she went to him; no doubt he would try to cheer and comfort her in his own quaint way, not by definite words, but by his quiet, unfailing understanding.

Did he know that she loved Michael Strasmore? She was sure that he did and that made her so afraid that, picking up a coat from the hall stand, she turned away from that friendly light and crossing the garden went out into the road.

Lonely here, too! But the air was cool and fresh, and overhead the sky was filled with stars.

Marlene walked on mechanically. It mattered so little which way she went, or where her steps ultimately

led. Was she to blame that things had gone so badly for her? People were as they were made, so how could she help it if she had looked at Hugh through rose-coloured glasses, seeing him as something he was not, and never had been?

"I am a rich man, and he is a poor man! Is *that* the difference?"

Cruel words, and yet she could understand the angry impulse which had forced Strasmore to utter them. He had made an ideal of her, whereas she was only a modern, self-assured "pin-up girl" who had brought him complete disillusionment.

He would never forgive her, she was sure! And yet—if he was a homeless wanderer without a penny in the world, as she had first thought him to be—she would never cease to love him!

Without a penny in the world! . . . Marlene shivered as she remembered that she had once said that very same thing to Hugh Clifford! Impossible to believe as it now seemed.

Years and years ago, surely!—in another lifetime! or when she was very young and foolish enough to be content with a handsome face and apparent adoration.

She thought of Strasmore and the harsh condemnation she had seen in his eyes when she left him.

No, he would never forgive her—never understand—even though he had not been ashamed to admit that long before they met—when he had first seen her photograph in another man's keeping—he had felt that she had always belonged to him!

If only she *could* belong to him! If only he would understand and forgive her! If only. . . . The daz-

ling glare of headlamps suddenly split the growing darkness of the narrow road, as a car, driven at great speed, rounded the bend.

The driver must have seen her, for she heard the harsh jamming of brakes and a warning shout as, panic-stricken, she turned wildly first one way and then the other, in a vain effort to escape.

She caught a fleeting glimpse of a man's face—Hugh Clifford's was it, or was that just her imagination? and heard a voice shout at her in hoarse anger,

"Where the hell are you going?" before the swerving car struck her shoulder, flinging her violently into the grass covered ditch at the side of the road, where she lay motionless, with unseeing eyes turned to the starlit sky.

But the car went on.

CHAPTER XI

CHIPPENDALE pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead and stood a little back from the trestle table to regard his skilfully repaired "Companionship" with profound satisfaction.

He had completed his task, thanks to Strasmore's long-awaited patent mender, and could now defy anyone—except the most critical of experts—to discover that it had ever been broken.

A good fellow, Strasmore—one of the best! A little difficult in some ways, Chippendale felt bound to admit—but he did not like people who were too

easy-going, or work which could be completed too quickly and without much effort.

He preferred spending days and even weeks over his handicraft instead of fashioning simple figures—such as he sometimes made for the village children—in an hour or two!

Outside in the darkness, the mournful hoot of an owl suddenly broke the silence, and Chippendale raised his brows dubiously, realising that it must be getting late. He knew that owl—knew where it lived in the tall trees behind the house, and that it seldom made itself heard much before midnight.

He jerked his spectacles back to their rightful place and looked across to a battered old clock which hung on the wall. Past twelve—and long past his usual bedtime.

The old man sighed as he remembered how Isabel used to come down to the workshop if he worked later than usual, to remind him that he was in danger of losing his beauty sleep! That had been one of her favourite jokes—beauty sleep, at his time of life!

Ah well! . . . Chippendale sighed again as he began to roll down his turned-up sleeves. Funny that Marlene hadn't come in search of him, but perhaps in her disturbed state of mind she had gone to bed earlier than usual.

A pity that two young people who were obviously so perfectly suited to one another should have foolishly raised so many difficulties on a road which to Chippendale had—from the very first—looked so easy and unclouded. Marlene's fault chiefly, he was bound to admit, but then—"youth must be served"—or, as the

poet expressed it, "How beautiful is youth, how bright its dreams"—and nobody knew better than Chippendale, how completely unreal and impossible the dreams of youth can be! Take his own marriage, for instance. He had believed it would mean complete happiness, and instead . . .! The old man shook his head in solemn self-reproach, as he remembered that after years of bickering, Martha had made generous reparation by unexpectedly dying and leaving him free to carry on with his hobby which she had so scornfully despised.

There had been a time when he had feared that Marlene was to face a similar tragedy to his own, by marrying Hugh Clifford, but thanks to the war and their enforced separation she had realised her mistake! Thanks to Strasmore, too, the old man told himself happily, even though as yet all was not well between them.

Still—he had successfully mended his favourite "Companionship," and surely that should be the best of all good omens, considering it was Marlene and Michael who had given him the idea for its construction.

Yes, they were admirably suited to one another, these two young people for whom he had so great an affection. He picked up the little carving and smiled with pride as once again he keenly examined his handiwork. Badly damaged it had been—but now he could defy anyone to discover where it was mended! He was about to place it for safety in a small cupboard, when there was a step on the path outside and Strasmore's voice at the door.

"Are you there, sir?"

Chippendale turned eagerly to greet him.

"Come in! Come in, and see how perfectly your patent mender has repaired the damage to 'Companionship.' I defy you to point out where the breakage actually was!"

He put the little figure into Strasmore's hand and there was a brief silence before Michael said,

"You've certainly made a fine job of it, sir, and I congratulate you. By the way—you haven't seen Allsorts, I suppose? I missed him on the road an hour ago, and though I thought I could hear him barking in the distance, he didn't come when I whistled, so I imagined he had run home!"

Chippendale shook his head. "No, I haven't seen him—but he may be up at the house with Marlene." He picked up his shabby old coat a little regretfully. "I suppose it's time I went to bed."

"You've been working late to-night."

"Yes, but time flies when one is so pleasantly occupied. Repairing damaged things has always strongly appealed to me, Michael! There is such infinite satisfaction in it, don't you agree?" and then as Strasmore did not reply, "You are late yourself, now I come to think of it! As Isabel would have said, we are both in danger of losing our beauty sleep."

"Yes." Strasmore obviously hesitated before continuing, "There has been a bad accident in the village—a car overturned. Nobody seems to have seen it happen, but—apparently it struck a wall—"

"Dear, dear!" Chippendale shook his old head ruefully. "Some youngster driving, I suppose! Driving too recklessly, no doubt! Perhaps after a merry evening, and a little too much to drink, very probably! Do you know whose car it was?"

"Yes, I——" Strasmore hesitated again, before he said reluctantly, "you're bound to hear in the morning, sir, so—it was Clifford's car—Hugh Clifford's——"

"Hugh — *Clifford* ! . . . Not ——" Chippendale stopped, realising that he had been about to say "not—Marlene's Hugh !"

"Yes," Strasmore said quietly, and then reluctantly, "He was—dead, sir—when they found him !"

"*Dead !*" Chippendale sat down heavily on the nearest chair. "Dead !" he repeated incredulously. "Are you—sure ?"

"Yes. I was——" He turned quickly. "There's someone outside——" but before he could reach the door, it was pushed open and Jane, a quaint figure with her hair in curl papers and a drab dressing-gown clutched tightly about her body, appeared on the threshold.

"I thought Miss Marlene might be with you, sir," she told Chippendale apologetically. "I can't find her anywhere—she's not in her room, and I've searched the house, but she's not there ! I woke up with a start—about ten minutes ago—you know, how it is when you wake up with a start—as if someone's called to you—though, of course, nobody *had* called to me !" In her distress, she was quite unconsciously imitating Isabel. "So I went to Miss Marlene's room, sir, but the bed's not been slept in—it's just turned down as I did it for her after supper, like I always do ! I thought she might be with you, Mr. Chippendale, sir !"

Chippendale shook his head. "I haven't seen her since supper-time ! . . . At least—I certainly thought I saw her go out at the gate, just as it was getting dark—but I can't be sure ! And that must be hours ago !"

He looked at Strasmore with sudden fear in his eyes. "You don't think—she wasn't—with—Clifford, was she?" he asked unsteadily.

"No—*no*!" Michael took an agitated stride towards the door. "She must be somewhere about—I'll——" He broke off as there was a pattering step on the gravel path and Allsorts bounded in. He was carrying something in his mouth which he laid down at his master's feet, looking up into his face with eloquent eyes which seemed to be praying for understanding and approval.

"Why—what has he got there?" Chippendale asked fearfully, and as he bent down to look more closely, there was a smothered cry from Jane.

"It's Miss Marlene's scarf—Miss Marlene's blue scarf that Miss Isabel gave her last Christmas! . . . I *knew* something had happened to her—I knew it had!" and she began to weep and wring her hands.

Strasmore's face was grey as he picked up the scarf, and Allsorts rose from his crouching position on the floor, his big body strained and on the alert as he waited for the order which he knew would come.

"*Find* her!"

The dog bounded away into the darkness, returning at every few yards to make sure that his master was following.

Out at the gate and along the silent, deserted road until he came to the place where Marlene was lying.

And there Allsorts stopped, with a little whine of delight at his own cleverness and obedience, as he gently licked Marlene's hand which was half buried in the long grass.

She did not move when Strasmore lifted her in his

arms, and in the clear starlight she looked deathly white and still as with a stifled groan he pressed his face to hers.

"Marlene—Marlene . . . !"

Had she been with Clifford? And if so—where were they going, and why should she be lying so far away from the spot where Clifford met his death? Not that it mattered—nothing mattered if only he could hear her say again that she loved him and would forgive him for his harsh relentlessness. The short distance back to the house was an endless nightmare, though Allsorts walked proudly ahead, uttering little barks of self-approval, and returning now and again to see that all was well with his beloved master.

Chippendale and Jane were at the open door—Jane fully dressed now, though she had forgotten to remove her curl-papers—and Chippendale—although he was probably not aware of it—with the little figure of "Companionship" sticking out of his coat pocket.

Jane gave a loud cry when she saw Marlene's white face and closed eyes.

"She's dead—she's dead!" she wailed hysterically, and then for once in his life Chippendale (as Jane afterwards described it when relating the story) "treated a woman rough" for he soundly boxed her ears as he said sharply:

"Don't talk damned rot, my good girl; this is a story with a happy ending, and she is no more dead than *you* are!"

He was perfectly right, of course! Chippendale was always right! And Dr. Green, urgently summoned from his bed, declared that beyond a badly bruised shoulder and severe shock there was no cause for alarm,

and that in a few days Marlene would be quite herself again.

"How did it happen?" he asked Chippendale, when they were alone.

The old man pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead with an agitated hand.

"I don't know," he admitted in a troubled voice. "But, as of course you are well aware, there has been a tragic accident in the village to-night—to poor young Clifford—and——" He shook his head.

"You mean—that she was with him? But the spot where you say she was found is some distance away from where the car crashed!"

Chippendale shook his head again.

"I know nothing," was all he could say. "We must wait until Marlene is well enough to explain, and until then it will be kinder not to attempt to make two and two out of a very probable one, don't you think?"

Dr. Green checked a smile as he agreed.

"I'll call again, first thing in the morning," he promised.

Chippendale glanced at the hall clock.

"It's morning now," he said simply. "And as the poet says," he added to himself as the doctor hurried out to his car, "though I cannot remember which poet it was, 'The night is long that never finds the day.'" He closed the front door and returned to the sitting-room where Strasmore was waiting, with Allsorts lying at his feet. The two men looked at one another in silence for a moment before Chippendale spoke.

"Dr. Green assures me there is no cause for alarm, and that, apart from a bruised shoulder and natural

shock, poor child, Marlene will soon be quite herself again."

Strasinore turned abruptly away.

"Thank God!"

Chippendale stooped to pat the dog's shaggy head.

"Not forgetting our very good friend, Allsorts!" he said simply, and Allsorts thumped the floor with his tail in profound appreciation.

Dr. Green was right too, for before very long Marlene was well enough to laugh when she saw that Allsorts was wearing a medal, which had been attached to his collar by the devoted Jane.

It was only a lucky threepenny bit with a hole bored through it which, as Jane explained when she escorted the dog to Marlene's room for her approval, she had had in her possession for longer than she could remember.

"And he shall have his name engraved on it some day," Jane declared. "As soon as I can find anyone to do it," she added darkly, for the local (alleged) silver-smith had protested that, owing to continued shortage of labour, she might have to wait at *least* six months before he could carry out her wish.

"And you call that winning the war!" Jane reproached him bitterly. But Allsorts seemed perfectly satisfied with his new decoration, and frequently tossed his head as if to draw attention to it. There were many sympathetic callers at Green Elms during the next few days, but Chippendale kindly and firmly refused to allow any of them to see Marlene, telling himself that Michael must be her first visitor.

So at lunchtime one day he remarked casually that Dr. Green had given Marlene permission to lie by the window for an hour or two that afternoon; he avoided

looking at Strasmore as he added, as if it were an entirely unimportant suggestion :

"So, if you care to see her, Michael, I think it will be quite in order."

But he escorted Strasmore to Marlene's room himself, tapping gently on the door and saying quietly as he opened it :

"Your first visitor, my dear," before, with a confident little smile on his kindly face, he pattered downstairs again.

Strasmore had often thought of this meeting, of the many things he would say ; but as it was he just crossed the room and, kneeling down beside her, took her in his arms.

It was a long time before he could speak, and then he said huskily :

"There is so much I want to tell you, my dear," and that simple "my dear" meant infinitely more to her than all the extravagant terms of endearment that Hugh Clifford had ever spoken. "But I don't know where to begin—and there aren't any words to tell you all I have suffered—all I—want you to understand."

Marlene's head was resting on his shoulder, but she looked up at him and smiled as she asked :

"Must you, Michael ? Because I can't find any words, either, to say—all I want to say."

"Does that mean—I am forgiven ?" he asked, and she answered :

"It means that I love you—and that means everything !"

"Better than you have ever loved—anyone else ?"

It was a moment before she could speak.

"It's so—utterly different, but I know you will believe me when I say that—compared with—what I

feel for you"—she shivered as she remembered how, even if it was only in imagination, she had believed the driver of the car that had so nearly cost her her life to be Hugh Clifford. And then, because she was somehow afraid, she said tremulously :

"I know it's—impossible, but I thought the man who was driving that car was—Hugh——" Her voice sank to a whisper. "But it couldn't have been, could it? because he would have stopped, wouldn't he? He wouldn't have left me as—as he did?"

So Strasmore told her the truth—simply and gently, holding her close in his arms.

"But we'll both forgive him, Marlene, won't we? because—you are safe—and because you are mine!"

So Chippendale was right, and theirs was a story with a happy ending, especially when Chippendale told them that, as it was so difficult to buy a suitable wedding present, he had decided to give them Green Elms. "But on one condition," he added with pretended severity, knowing there would be no difficulty about it at all. "That Jane and I may still stay here if we promise not to be more trouble than we can help!"

The thought of leaving the old man had been the one cloud on Marlene's happiness, and there were tears in her eyes as she kissed him.

"Have you ever been any trouble to anyone?" she asked; though later, when she told Michael Strasmore, she said diffidently :

"But will it be all right for you—living here?"

Strasmore laughed. "How dare you ask such a question?" he demanded with pretended severity. "When you know what I told you when we first met—or have you forgotten?"

Marlene's voice was infinitely tender as she quoted the verse to which he referred.

"I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled
Above the green elms, that a cottage was near ;
And I said 'If there's peace to be found in the world,
A heart that is humble might hope for it here.'"

and then she said, hesitatingly :

"You know, Michael, the very first time I saw you I had a strange feeling that we had met before—somewhere, and that's why you have never really seemed—a stranger to me ! But I suppose it's just my imagination, and we *hadn't* met before that day, had we ?"

Strasmore drew her into his arms as he asked :

"Do you believe in affinity, Marlene ?"

"In—affinity ?"

"Yes. I can't explain as I should like to—not in my own words, but——" He laughed with boyish embarrassment. "You will think I have mistaken my vocation, and should have been a poet if I quote many more verses to you, but this one is so eloquently descriptive of what I want to say, and what I, too, felt when I first saw you that I hope you will forgive me ! This is it, and I think it's the answer to—everything !

"Two shall be born the whole wide world apart,
And speak in different tongues, and have no thought
Each of the other's being, and no heed.
But all unconsciously shape every act
And bend each wandering step to this one end—
That one day, out of darkness, they shall meet,
And read life's meaning in each other's eyes."

He held her at arm's length, and for a moment they looked at one another in complete sympathy and understanding before Marlene put her arms round his neck, drawing him down to her and pressing her cheek to his.

" 'And read life's meaning,' " she whispered. " Yes, that was it—affinity ! . . . And I'm so perfectly happy—I never thought there could be such happiness ! . . . Is that how you feel, too ? " she asked shyly, but she did not really need a reply.

* * * * *

Only Gladys Trounce, when she heard the news, was bitterly critical.

" With all his money, I should have thought Michael could have found a finer house to live in," she told her brother, and Stuart winced as he wondered whether there *could* be a finer house anywhere in the world or a more fortunate man than Strasmore !

" I suppose when you're married you'll want a place the size of Buckingham Palace," he told her cynically, but Gladys only laughed and admitted that perhaps he was right ; though she did not tell him that she was already on friendly terms with old Dontcherknow, and had great hopes that, if she whistled loudly enough and for long enough, Sir David might obligingly come trotting to heel.

So Isabel's dream came true, and one morning with Marlene on his arm, Chippendale walked proudly up the aisle of the village church in his best suit and in creaking shoes !

Everyone was there ! the Trounces in the front pew and Mrs. Parsons from the provision shop in the back

pew, with a handful of rationed rice stowed guiltily away in her pocket.

And Isabel was there too, Marlene was sure of that ! smiling happily because it was a Saturday, and because the bridegroom was—as she had at last remembered—
“ Michael—our dear friend Michael ! ”

While outside, in the sunshine—just as she had dreamed—Allsorts, with a white bow on his collar, waited patiently for his master.

THE END

